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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize how writers use and combine different strategies to develop their ideas
- Explore composing moves to help you describe and explain
- Explore composing moves to help you analyze and argue
- Explore composing moves to help you explore and reflect

Dancers have names for many of the moves they make: ballet dancers do *plies* while bboys and bgirls do *windmills*. While an individual motion (one toe point, one leg lift) is important but often too small for viewers to see, each overall move is recognizable by the audience and has a different effect: some moves quiet the audience down, and others provide energy. Sports participants or gamers may call this kind of component a “play” and knitters may call it a “stitch”: not the whole game or even a whole strategy, but a recognizable and plannable sequence of events. These moves are less precise than a formula for a math or science computation, but they serve the same purpose: they allow an expert to make one decision that solves a medium-sized piece of their current problem.

Writers have moves, too: recognizable sequences or approaches that help us make decisions about how we connect with and communicate to readers. Some of our moves are more factual and others are more persuasive; some moves in writing focus on getting the details exactly right and others help us explore possibilities. Several of our threshold concepts for writing help us understand why there are so many different moves:



Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

**There is no single definition of a “good writer”**

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce “good writing” depending on the writer’s goals and the audience’s needs.

**There are many ways to solve a writing problem**

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

For the purposes of writing as you use this book, you can think of a *move* as a repeated pattern that is smaller than a genre or an overall purpose, but larger than a single choice about a paragraph, sentence, or design element. A single document like a film analysis essay or a proposal for change will probably require a combination of different moves: some repeated for consistency, some different from each other for additional range or power. By learning how writers use these moves and combine them to create powerful documents, you will become more flexible and successful at solving advanced writing problems.

14.1 Identifying and Combining Moves

The nine moves identified in this chapter are common across many kinds of writing in US academic and professional settings, though they’re not the only moves writers make. (You may have writing moves of your own, combining words and sentences in a move that will “keep my parents calm” or “show my boss how the whole team contributed.”) The more familiar you are with these common moves, and the better you understand how each one enables or limits communication with your audience, the more efficient and effective you will be in your writing.

Dancers, gamers, and knitters often practice one move at a time. Writers can also practice one move at a time to improve our skills, especially in school. After all, each of the nine moves explained here—sometimes called *modes of development*, sometimes called goals or purposes—combines a set of smaller decisions to create a particular effect on the audience, and writers need to develop strong skills with each move. Moreover, often we select one move as a foundation for our whole writing task: we say to ourselves, “Today’s writing project will be mostly narrative [or mostly argumentative].”

To practice a move, you need to know its main characteristics. The move called *exposition* (explaining) requires evenhanded attention to key details, a logical organization, and an objective style, while the move called *narration* may emphasize some details more than others and strive for a more emotional or eloquent style. At their edges, the moves may blend into one another: you might come to think of *summary* as a very condensed kind of *exposition*, or of *reflection* as a very self-focused

exploration. But you will still probably move differently as a writer if you intend primarily to explain a whole situation rather than summarize its key elements.

In addition to identifying individual moves, you will benefit from reflecting on how you can practice them and then combine them to produce an overall document. Like dancers, writers usually combine different moves into each performance: while a particular move may be repeated several times, the best performances include at least a few different moves. So writers not only need to be able to perform a move; we need to decide which moves will work together to meet our readers' expectations and accomplish our overall goals. Adding a little *narrative* or some personal *reflection* into an *argument* for a new recycling center can increase readers' connection with our ideas, but if we get carried away with a long story, readers may get distracted from our overall goal. The more familiar you are with the advantages and limitations of each move, the more efficient and effective you will be at combining moves in your writing.

14.2 Narration

Narration is from the Latin-based word for storytelling; it comes from a word-root meaning "to know." As you narrate, you say what you know best: usually, something that happened to you, or that feels like it could have happened to you. Our oldest and most enduring communications with one another as human beings are narratives, whether true stories or more fantastical ones. Writers narrate scenes or stories specifically to form connections: often stories strengthen the bond between writers and readers, and stories help link separate facts and events together in a way that readers can identify with and remember. Just hearing the familiar start of a story can relax or engage you:

Once upon a time . . .

When in the course of human events . . .

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive . . .

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . .

You better not never tell nobody but God . . .

Hey, you're not going to believe what happened to me yesterday . . .

Narration focuses on time

It's not a coincidence that so many of these introductions suggest a time signature: when you narrate, you explain something that you know that happened at a

particular time, an event or a series of connected events. A good story, like a good song, has a pace and structure to it: even a slow-paced song rises and falls, building in complexity and finishing smoothly. A good story also has a purpose to it, if not a point or a moral: within a particular context, a writer wishes a particular audience to have a memorable experience or find a particular connection.

Narration is characterized also by a carefully controlled sequencing of events. Often the sequence is strictly chronological, moving from beginning to end in a single flow. Moreover, the writer emphasizes some events or moments more than others, to help readers connect. A three-minute marriage proposal might take several pages to describe, while a few key moments out of semester of studying abroad in Kenya could be described in a paragraph or two. Writers provide more details at key moments to enhance the emotional experience of reading about the event, rather than simply summarizing each step equally.

Sometimes writers decide to disrupt chronological order using flashbacks or other interruptions to pique readers' interest, such as starting a narrative at or near its most dramatic moment. While a little chronological variety can add contrast and energy to your writing, the more complicated an organizational strategy you choose, the higher the risk you run that your readers may lose the pacing of the story.

Narration gives a distinct point of view

Narration is characterized by a distinct perspective or viewpoint: the reader sees events as they are perceived by a knowledgeable source. Often this viewpoint is first-person, using *I* and *we* pronouns, since this allows the writer to draw on well-known details and persuade the reader that the testimony is accurate and truthful. (While some instructors would argue that first-person pronouns are not allowed in formal or school writing, you should be learning to question whether this kind of rule applies to all writing situations.) Sometimes the viewpoint is third-person: you can tell a story that happened to your sister or your uncle. The further the viewpoint is from the writer, though, the less knowledge the writer has, and more the writing becomes generally descriptive rather than personally narrative.

Thus, narration is characterized by a high tolerance for stylistic flexibility or innovation. Readers expect that different people will narrate the same event using different details, sentences, and words, to show how each person's experience is unique. If you are writing a first-person narrative, your sentences may use a style that is casual, eloquent, and varied, so that readers get the feeling of being in the room with you and identify with your perspective. Even third-person narration often uses vivid descriptions and active verbs to emphasize key moments.

NOTE: Narration’s hidden partners. You may have a friend who talks or uses social media to go on and on about everything that happened that day, making you wonder “What’s the point?” Although human beings are wired to tell stories, we’re not wired to listen to endless narration that doesn’t feel relevant. Whether you’re writing a novel or writing your notes from an ethnographic observation of kids on a playground, your narration should always have a point—which means that effective narration nearly always partners with another move such as *explanation* or *argument*. You might use implicit goal statements rather than state directly that you’re telling a story to persuade your readers to act, and you may use open-form paragraphs that let you subtly emphasize actions rather than stating them in topic sentences. But when writing a narrative, you should always know what other partner-move(s) you are including in your project.

Use narration to deepen personal connections

Narration is especially good for:

- Testifying about your own (or another person’s) experience when it is relevant and trusted
- Sharing an immediate, specific, humanized viewpoint
- Engaging an audience emotionally
- Freewriting to increase your own connection to a writing task

Narration may be counterproductive when:

- Your audience does not trust or value one individual experience as useful data
- You need readers to focus on your main purpose without distraction
- You want readers to remain objective rather than emotional

Narration is found in **multiple academic and professional documents**: histories and biographies, field or lab notes, training manuals, and minutes of a meeting.

Practice

- To practice **generating** narrative, see [Believing/Doubting](#), [Funny Story](#), [Off on a Rant](#), [Scenarios](#), [Seven Generations](#), or [Used to Think / Now I think](#).
- To practice **organizing** narrative, see [Shrunken Draft](#) or [Six Structures](#).



Learn

- To learn more about using narration as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see [Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain](#).
- To learn more about **organizing** your narrative or adapting your **focal statement**, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **adapting your style** to your narrative, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).



14.3 Description

Description (a word based on the Latin verb “to write”) is a broadly applicable approach: you use it in nearly every kind of writing you do. When you extend it beyond a phrase or a few sentences, so that it becomes a major move in your writing project, you need to tune your writing carefully to the audience and purpose of each situation. As with *explanation*, your goal is to provide information; descriptive writing often focuses more on the exact ways someone *observes and experiences* an event or scene, rather than a more objective explanation of what features or steps are important.

When readers ask for more description, they are signaling that they don’t think the language a writer has provided has given enough information to replace the images and concepts already in their mind with new images and concepts. Beyond just understanding the information you say, readers of descriptive writing want to imagine for themselves the scene or situation you guide them toward. If readers are unfamiliar with your topic, you might need to solve the problem by providing more details overall so that your readers experience all the important elements. If readers are familiar with one version of your topic, you might enhance their understanding by identifying a few distinguishing details as vividly as possible: every time you describe your house as “the one halfway down the block with the big red door and the half-rusted blue truck in front” or you describe your uncle as “the tall guy with the off-beat saunter and a smile like Idris Elba,” you pick a few key elements that help readers build a mental image that is different from *their* houses and uncles.

Extended description focuses on concrete details

Extended description can be characterized by sensory observation: often writers focus on sights and sounds, but research shows that readers also respond strongly to details about smells and tastes, and we use our sense of touch to

estimate connection or disconnection. In past centuries, when people had less access to pictures and videos, descriptions were necessary to share all of these senses. Even now, factors like smell, taste, and touch cannot be captured by video, so people still need writers using language carefully to convey these elements of an experience or process. Moreover, as a writer you can improve on a random video camera by selecting which details to focus on, and for how long, to help readers feel the importance of one element of a situation. To convey sensory impressions, writers need to go beyond adjectives like *little* or *warm*, drawing on exact details like “two centimeters long” or “eighty-seven degrees with almost no humidity.”

Extended description also relies on factual language: among the obvious facts are weights and dimensions, speeds and densities, intensities and distances. Writers may also need to consider other factual properties, such as materials, composition, interactions, distribution, age or origin. How many details could you provide about a penny in your pocket, or about a sports car you drove last week, that would help readers experience it the way you did? The facts of a situation can alter over time, or change after an intervention or catalyst is introduced, so you may need multiple measurements and attention to what has changed. Don't forget to mention facts about what is surprisingly present, or what is absent or missing: a car that is fast but has very little engine noise delivers a different driving experience than a car with a loud “vroom!”

Extended description uses metaphorical language carefully

Some readers expect description to be mostly factual: your organic chemistry lab instructor may not want you to include any details that aren't measurable. But your ecology instructor may want you to address the human experience in your field notes: since facts aren't always enough to convey that experience, description can also be characterized by comparative language, either literal or figurative.

One way to move an unfamiliar image or concept vividly into a reader's mind is to compare it to a familiar one, or to one that the reader can construct from familiar components. You can write that your best friend's house smells “like a pie bakery,” and then readers who are familiar with some version of actual bakery smells will add that to their new mental picture. Using a more metaphorical language, you can write that your grandmother was “as comforting as warm apple pie”: readers who know the smell will draw a connection one way, and readers who don't know apple pie may still think of another comforting smell to help the *feeling* of your grandmother come through. You might need more details to share an experience with your reader: if you write that an old building “smelled like apple pie that had started to go sour, with a hint of old shoe leather,” readers will start to assemble a complex smell in their heads understand your experience.

NOTE: Integrating micro-descriptions. While some writing moves like narration and summary need to be presented in sizeable chunks (because a story isn't much of a story if there's just one moment), writers can choose description as a significant move even when we intend to use it in small pieces. For instance, journalists or podcast writers often weave description into their explanatory reports, adding an occasional sentence describing a town or a person who they interviewed. When they do that kind of brief-but-vivid writing throughout an article or episode, the pieces add up to a move that readers or listeners can recognize: "That was informative *and* descriptive." If you think readers will value or benefit from more connection to an issue but not be excited by long, eloquent meditations on all the details, you might commit to your descriptive move but use shorter, frequent bursts of sensory or metaphorical language.

Use extended description to inform and involve readers

Description is especially good for:

- Helping readers replicate a key situation or scenario in their own minds
- Giving a multidimensional picture of important people, places, objects, or events
- Making an unfamiliar or abstract concept seem more straightforward or realistic

Description can be counterproductive when:

- Your readers already know most of the details you can provide
- You need readers to move quickly to judgment or action
- Your balance of literal and figurative description doesn't match readers' expectations for a particular discipline or genre

Description is found in multiple academic and professional documents: journals, lab or field notes, client intake reports, travel reviews, video game proposals, or documentation of important office achievements or needs.

Practice

- To practice **generating** vivid description from your own knowledge, see [Expand and Narrow](#) or [Explode a Moment](#).
- To practice **generating** vivid description that explores another perspective, see [Inner Three-Year-Old](#), [Scenarios](#), or [Three Cubes](#).



Learn

- To learn more about using description as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see [Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain](#).
- To learn more about creating **descriptive sentences**, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).



14.4 Summary

A formal *summary* is a specific kind of exposition, usually designed as a service to your readers. The goal of a summary is to explain a large amount of information—from a single source or about a single event or issue—in a condensed, accessible overview so that busy readers can understand the key elements without having to gather, organize, and review all the details themselves. You can see summaries all around you: plot summaries of books or movies, official minutes of a board meeting, sports-channel recaps of football games, and abstracts of scientific articles. Often after we review a summary, we make the decision to read, listen to, attend, or view the larger text or event, so a good summary can serve as an introduction and even an advertisement. Many times, however, we review a summary instead of taking time to read or view the larger text, so the summary needs to stand on its own as a reasonable representation of what readers most need to know in a particular context.

In a school situation, you might write a summary as a service to yourself, in order to enhance your own knowledge of a text or situation: since you learn as you write, you can teach yourself a concept, a line of argument, or a process by explaining it concisely in your own words. Your summary can also demonstrate to your instructor that you have understood the crucial elements of a text, process, or situation. By framing your knowledge in the language of the field or context and identifying the most important parts, you can show that you have learned a way of thinking that is appropriate for that situation as well as that you understand a few pertinent facts. In either case, writing a shorter summary can help you identify the core ideas and arguments of a text or situation; writing a more extended summary can help you map out the supporting evidence, reasoning, or contributing factors.

Summaries are objective and accurate

A summary of any kind is characterized by objectivity: unless you are specifically told otherwise, you should not include your judgments about the quality of the text, event, or process. Often you will summarize a text or event that contains other people's arguments or judgments, and your goal is to represent those

arguments without indicating whether you agree with or criticize them (even though sportscasters and movie reviewers often combine summaries with arguments about what went well or was done poorly). Part of being objective is being complete, because if you omit a central argument or concept, you may unintentionally prejudice your reader for (or against) the remaining arguments.

A summary requires accuracy but usually not direct repetition or duplication: usually a summary should be expressed in your own words (using paraphrase) rather than as a quilt of phrases or images from the original. In a very few situations, a direct quotation may be acceptable or even necessary, but by translating actions or concepts into new sentences, writers help our readers three ways: we can use fewer words, link ideas together more smoothly, and adapt the diction to match readers' knowledge. (Writers may need to repeat technical language, however: there may be no alternate term for a *liquid fluoride thorium reactor*, for instance.) In order to be accurate, summary writers need to be careful and active readers and re-readers who understand the background situation as well as the facts and the reasonings or events under consideration; otherwise, we make errors in choosing and paraphrasing important points. Overall, writers should accurately represent both the topic and the stance of the original: if the original performance included an argument or a particular point of view, the summary should identify that angle.

Summaries prioritize key issues

A summary reflects the priority and then the proportion of the original: your main responsibility is to convey the information most crucial to your readers. Usually this will be the information that the original authors or performers deemed most important: their arguments, results, and/or key examples. Readers trust summaries not just to indicate generally what was in the original, but how much emphasis was given in the original. Writers of very short summaries often represent only what the original author emphasized as the most major point or two. Writers of longer summaries (such as encyclopedia articles or book summaries) should try to represent the original ideas in proportion to their original importance: if a third of the original text focused on a single case study, a significant section of the summary should describe that study.

NOTE: Avoid the summary trap. While writing an accurate, balanced, objective summary can require careful attention, summarizing someone else's points or actions is nearly always easier for writers than generating our own argument, response, or reflection. When writers are unfamiliar with a topic, unconfident about our own thinking, or even just tired, we can slide into writing more summary than we need (and more than readers expect). If you are working on a writing project that

requires summary plus other writing moves, keep checking your work to be sure that you are making the right moves at the right time.

Use summary to convey background or complex ideas quickly

Summary is especially good for:

- Bringing readers up to speed on specific sources of background information
- Giving credit to researchers who contributed facts or theories on an issue
- Simplifying an important but complicated situation for novices or newcomers
- Condensing your own or others' complex arguments for quick review by busy readers

Summary can be counterproductive when:

- The text or situation is simple or already familiar to your audience
- Writers reveal so much that readers are no longer interested in the original (“spoilers”) or lose their focus
- Writers need to focus more on analysis or argumentation in order to make progress or meet readers' expectations

Summary is found in multiple academic and professional documents: abstracts or literature review sections of journal articles, the opening of a public speech for a general audience, a legal brief or political white paper, the start of a performance or event review, an annual report to stakeholders, or medical case notes.

Practice

- To practice **condensing information** that you can use in your summary, see [Boil Down](#), [Elevator Speech](#), or [Shrunken Draft](#).
- To practice **organizing source information** that you can use in your summary, see [Source Synthesis Grid](#) or [They Say + I Say](#).



Learn

- To learn more about how **discourse communities** influence the decisions you make in summarizing information, see [Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs](#).
- To learn more about **active reading strategies** that will help you summarize a text, see [Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer](#).
- To learn more about strategies for **paraphrasing** other texts accurately and ethically, see [Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources](#).



14.5 Explanation and Definition

An *explanation*—sometimes called exposition or expository writing—provides facts and examples that are thorough enough that your reader can complete a process, replicate a thought-experiment, or understand a chain of reasoning that is clear to you. Often as a writer you have more at stake in an exposition than in a description or narration: even if a reader misses part of a story or misunderstands the exact color of a house, you may still make a strong connection and convey most of the scene. However, if a reader misses a step in assembling a complex machine or misunderstands a key legal concept regarding foster child placement, the reader—and others—could face significant negative consequences.

In a professional or workplace setting, writers often have to *explain how* a process happens (or give instructions on how to complete a process) or *explain why* something happens, outlining the causes and effects in a common sequence of events or behaviors. In a journalistic or social setting, writers may write a profile to *explain who* a person is or *explain what* an organization or destination is like. In an academic setting, writers may develop an *extended definition* to explain a complicated term, concept, or theory that specialists use in the field.

Explanation helps novices understand and act

Expository writing is characterized by an expert-to-nonexpert orientation: writers assume the stance of a knowledgeable insider clarifying complicated information for a novice or an interested bystander. Although the reader may not be familiar with the material, the explanation usually focuses on elements and actions that experts generally agree on: Pad Thai should usually be cooked with specific ingredients and these steps, circuit boards function according to standard principles, and Maslow's hierarchy of human needs involves basic concepts that are important for managers or for educational psychologists to know. Writing as an expert to a nonexpert audience is especially tricky because it can be difficult to anticipate (or remember) what novice readers don't know: your mind is so accustomed to knowing an idea that it may skip steps, oversimplify an explanation, or rely on specialized jargon in a way that leaves readers confused.

Explanations are often written to be complete and immediately useful: where a successful description of a great meal can “leave the reader wanting more,” a successful explanation cannot. If the Pad Thai tastes bland or Maslow's hierarchy still seems irrelevant to modern corporations or classrooms, the explanation has failed even if it was vivid, entertaining, or accurate in many places. Usability is situational, so the instructions that your Aunt Lu can use to make Pad Thai successfully in her gourmet kitchen will probably be different from the ones that your teenage cousins need to cook a dish for their school's International Day. Writers may need to experiment with several levels of completeness, accessibility,

and clarity, and seek additional feedback from readers, in order to judge whether an explanation achieves their goals.

Explanation addresses the parts and the whole

Explanation is characterized by a parts-to-whole focus: writers need to show readers what each of the steps, parts, characteristics, aspects, or contributing factors is in itself, and then how (and possibly when) each of those parts contributes to the overall process, event, person, or concept. Some explanations, like Pad Thai instructions, arrange parts in chronological order; others, like an overview of management strategies, may arrange the parts in order of importance or complexity.

If you have ever felt frustrated by a poorly written instruction manual, you know how crucial it is for an expository writer to keep track of all the parts and delineate all the steps. Even for a more abstract explanation, such as a definition of “childhood,” breaking the information into parts will help a reader: what are the foundational elements of the concept? what are the most widely accepted elements, and what details or nuances help readers see the limits of the concept? In some cases, parts or steps may themselves need to be subdivided into smaller parts: for instance, readers may need to consider that the step of etching of a circuit board can be completed in several possible ways.

NOTE: How to explain to your instructor. Many of the explanations you write for school assignments have the opposite rhetorical situation from explanations outside of school: you are a novice explaining an idea to an expert, your instructor. Many course assignments and exams ask students to explain concepts, processes, or events as a way of demonstrating their learning. Novices explaining to experts might well feel nervous, and might assume they can skip steps or leave out “obvious” parts, since the instructor already knows so much. To succeed in this situation, you might need to imagine you are writing to someone even less experienced than you are who really needs the information, and adopt a confidence you don’t yet feel.

Use explanation to inform novice readers and help them plan

Explanation is especially good for:

- Providing background information or definitions of key terms or concepts
- Establishing your authority on the known facts before you move to analysis
- Identifying the key elements of one or more proposals, processes, or theories before evaluating their merits
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Explanation can be counterproductive when:

- Readers already know as much about the issue as the writer does
- It is written at a level of jargon or complexity that readers cannot easily grasp
- It is incomplete or not detailed enough to directly guide readers' thinking or action
- You need to be moving directly into analysis or argumentation in order to meet your goal or your readers' expectations (see "Avoid the Summary Trap" in the Summary section earlier in this chapter)

Explanation is found in multiple academic and professional documents: mid-term examinations, lab reports, training guides, biographies, product manuals, and progress reports.

Practice

- To **prepare** to explain by identifying what your audience may need to know, see [Audience Profile](#), [Inner Three-Year-Old](#), or [Question Ladders](#).
- To **generate** explanations, see [Expert/Novice](#), [Explode a Moment](#), [Subtopic Generator](#), or [Used To Think / Now I Think](#).



Learn

- To learn more about using description as a **large-project goal** rather than a single move, see [Chapter 15: Developing Projects that Explain](#).
- To learn more about **organizing** your explanation, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).



14.6 Classification and Comparison

Writers use *classification* moves and *comparison* moves (which are also sometimes called comparison-and-contrast moves) when we want readers to review a complex concept, issue, or situation one piece at a time. A grocery store and an online news site each use classification to help customers easily find what they're looking for: coffee is often classified in an aisle along with other "breakfast foods" like tea, cereal, and snack bars, while a story about a university lacrosse team might be either in "sports" or in "local news," depending on its focus. When we review products or ideas next to one another, we can then compare and contrast them more easily—two brands of coffee, or all the local college team performances—and take action based on what we see.

As you make classification and comparison moves, you will typically take three steps to help readers understand your overall goal:

- Choose the categories or points of comparison
- Provide details that demonstrate similarities and differences
- Explain how the parts integrate into a whole

The divisions you draw and the connections you build can help readers who are unfamiliar with an issue or concept see how it works.

Finally, you should remember that while classification and comparison moves are distinct enough that writers use them deliberately, these moves rarely stand on their own. Just as gymnasts practice their landing moves but don't construct a whole tumbling routine out of landings, writers use comparison moves to present ideas to readers but rarely set out to write "a comparison-contrast essay." Instead, classification and comparison moves should amplify another goal. For instance, when you divide a narrative into beginning-middle-end, divide an explanation or instructions into first-second-third, or divide an argument into for-and-against, you are using classification and comparison to support another writing move—and that partner move will affect how you design your categories.

Classifications and comparisons depend on writers' choices about categories

Choosing the divisions or criteria requires most of the writer's insight. A typical grocery store classifies all its products into categories to place in different aisles: one for fresh produce, one for baking needs, one for canned foods. Some products like lettuce or flour have obvious homes, but others require more judgment. Does your store keep raisins with the fresh produce or the canned fruit, or perhaps put them in the baking supplies or the cereal aisle? Each choice could be explained by a different rationale, and would make sense to different people. Likewise, when you finally find the raisins together so you can compare them, you choose criteria to focus on: price is an obvious comparison, but some people choose by considering package size, organic vs. traditional farming sources, trusted brand names, or even the picture on the front.

Your choice of categories or criteria to use should reflect your overall goals and your audience's needs. If you are writing to explain graduation requirements at your college to a high-school sophomore, you may try to simplify the process by using obvious categories such as core requirements and classes in the major. If you are writing to argue to your college peers or administrators about the usefulness of required courses, you might create new categories of classes—"continuation of high school, new but not-challenging, new and challenging"—to help your reader see your particular view. If you are comparing films set in World War

II, you could compare their lead characters and main plot points to recommend to your friends which one to watch, or you could compare the lighting, camera angles, and editing of the battle scenes to show other film scholars how techniques evolved over time. Advanced writers often look for unexpected divisions or criteria so that they can show readers a new viewpoint: arranging a grocery store into categories according how far items traveled to get to your town would not make products easy to find, but might help readers see lettuce in a new light.

Classifications and comparisons require organized details and overall integration

You can see how comparing two films based on three categories or criteria could challenge your ability to keep ideas organized, especially if one category—camera angles—has subcategories for studio and on-site filming. Unless you create a predictable pattern, readers will get lost, and the advantage of seeing the parts will dissolve into the chaos of too many pieces. To solve this problem, writers usually choose either a block organization pattern (all the details about one movie, then all the details about the other) or a point-by-point organization pattern (all the details about lighting for both films, then all the details about studio camera angles). Often writers choose a block pattern when the differences are obvious or the argument is easy to make, and choose a point-by-point pattern when close comparisons are needed to identify specific areas of alignment or contrast.

Remember that your organization should also enable you to help readers understand the overall concept: how college requirements work, and how war films are made. It's easy to get swept away by all the details of each category or comparison and forget your partner move: what are you explaining, arguing, or reflecting on, and what do you most want readers to believe or do? You may weave your partner move into each section or use it mostly at the start and end of a document, but you need to make it visible to readers.

NOTE: Not just black-or-white. Writers are often advised to make their classifications *complete and absolute*. For instance, the vehicles in a parking lot shouldn't be classified into just "family cars" and "pick-up trucks." That classification system isn't complete because some vehicles are neither category (it's hard to get a whole family onto a motorcycle) and the boundaries aren't absolute, because some vehicles might be both (an extended-cab truck might be a family's main vehicle). Similarly, writers can be urged to have black-or-white comparisons: positions are either for *or* against, prices are either high *or* low. Those guidelines may not work for the complicated situations that advanced writers and readers encounter, so writers may need to acknowledge that some category boundaries are permeable

or blurry (sometimes writers find that a knowledge problem is hard to separate from a rhetoric problem, even though the categories are still useful), and that some problems are too complex to reduce to a balanced two-part comparison (there might be three or even four sides to a story).

Use classification and comparison to break big ideas into manageable parts

Classification and comparison are especially good for:

- Explaining a complex concept by breaking it into parts or comparing it to a familiar idea or item
- Demonstrating a new way of looking at a familiar concept
- Identifying the key similarities and differences that readers need to know to choose a product or action
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Classification and comparison are counterproductive when:

- Categories or comparisons are so obvious that readers see nothing new
- Categories or comparisons don't account for all the important parts or criteria
- Categories or comparisons are not supported by exact and credible examples
- Readers are overwhelmed with details and cannot follow the overall explanation, argument, or reflection

Classification moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: philosophical analyses, ecology field reports, tour guides, inventories, scouting reports, market research, and crime scene analyses.

Comparison and/or contrast moves are also found in multiple academic and professional documents: literary analyses, art or product reviews, policy recommendations, cross-cultural analyses, physical therapy progress reports, or financial planning evaluations.

Practice

- To practice **creating categories** that can help your classification, see [3D Mind Map](#), [Evidence Garden](#), or [Subtopic Generator](#).
- To practice categorizing **elements of your own writing** to understand your processes better, see [Genre Ethnography](#), [Not-Talk](#), or [Source Synthesis Grid](#).



Learn

- To learn more about **organizing** your classification or comparison, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **analyzing** the nuances of the categories or contrasts you identify, see [Chapter 16: Developing Projects that Analyze](#).



14.7 Argumentation

Argumentative or persuasive writing moves are almost as fundamental to human communication as narrative moves are: even very young children learn to argue for what they want. Some writing scholars have gone as far as to suggest that all writing is argumentative, because writers nearly always want to change or expand the way readers think. The argumentative moves described here will help when you want to directly and significantly change your reader’s mind or behavior. When you argue, you need to identify the point of disagreement, adapt to your readers’ current values and reasons, and provide sufficient, credible evidence in support of your claims.

Because we argue about so many things, writers have developed different strategies to support different kinds of argument. The three classifications of argument below identify common types of argument. You may find you choose one over another for part of your writing project, or that you combine them: perhaps you will evaluate three budget plans in order to recommend a sound financial policy.

Evaluative arguments focus on criteria and concrete evidence

When writers make claims about the value of an object, performance, person, process, event, policy, or proposal, they make evaluative arguments. In today’s world of likes, reviews, retweets, and comment boxes, people do a lot of quick and sometimes superficial evaluating, but advanced writers need to build a more thorough case. Writers need to identify and state the terms of argument—the criteria—because the disagreements can focus on abstract or very fine points of distinction. The phrase “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has its roots in difficult evaluation arguments. All “beholders” have the right to argue that their criteria and evidence for judging something “beautiful” (or *effective*, or *too expensive*, or *acceptable*, or *unelectable*) are sufficient and even superior to other reasons and evidence.

Evaluation arguments are characterized by direct articulation of criteria or warrants: since “beholders” may have different standards, you must clarify whether you prefer a restaurant that has spicy or creamy food, an employee who is outspoken or one who is compliant, the cheapest or the fastest printer available. Two intelligent people who disagree about whether a restaurant, employee, or printer is “good” frequently do so because they use different criteria, or they rank criteria

in different orders, to determine what “good” means. Sometimes effective arguments are built on convincing readers that the criteria they have been using are insufficient: someone shopping for a printer that has a cheap initial sales price may benefit from knowing how to judge the price of ink cartridges needed to keep that printer running. In other cases, however, you need to work within your readers’ criteria: if your company champions innovative thinking, you will find it difficult to persuade your boss to hire employees based on how well they follow directions. Either way, your evaluation needs to state and explain your reasoning for the criteria you will use.

Since evaluations argue for an abstract position like “delicious” or “effective,” writers need to be particularly careful to provide exact measurements or examples for each criterion. When you are supporting your judgments about measurable criteria such as the price, fuel economy, or safety record of an automobile, you will be able to provide verifiable facts. When you are presenting evidence of a more abstract quality such as an employee’s leadership and ingenuity, you may provide exact examples of the person’s contributions to specific projects at work, a quotation from a manager’s performance review, or concrete descriptions of how they interact with colleagues in a team meeting.

Evaluative argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Practicing or starting your argument moves, since “thumbs up/thumbs down” is a fundamental human judgment
- Writing persuasively about abstract concepts, emotions, theories, or performances
- Uncovering the hidden assumptions or conflicting values that complicate other arguments

Evaluative argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You want to summarize someone else’s writing or position objectively
- You want to describe a situation vividly without having readers see it as good or bad
- You need to create room for multiple value systems to be considered as part of an exploratory analysis or policy recommendation

Evaluative argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: movie or restaurant reviews, performance assessments, client intake reports, literature or arts analyses, candidate recommendations, health guidelines.

Cause and effect arguments address both near and distant events

When writers make claims about the most likely *causes* or *effects* of a decision,

event, policy, action, process, or program, they must consider not just the nearby or obvious causes/effects, but causes and effects that are more distant, less visible, and/or less directly linked to the center of attention. When people disagree about what the causes or effects of an action are, it's usually because they're looking at more distant points along a timeline.

For instance, few people watching an interview with survivors of a severe weather event will disagree about the immediate causes or effects: a tornado destroying a mobile home clearly caused injuries to the people inside the home. However, many people will disagree about more-distant causes of the family's suffering: did the town need better warning systems? do neighborhoods need more shelters or stricter building codes? Is climate change a factor? Many other people will disagree about the long-term effects: will paying the victims' medical and reconstruction costs affect the state budget? Will repeated tornados lower property values or drive down the town's population?

Causal arguments are characterized by attention to multiple possibilities. Very few events that involve complex natural or social environments have a single cause or a single effect. If you and your readers disagree about causes or effects, you are likely focusing on different decisions or priorities. To argue effectively, you need to imagine how alternate choices or forces could lead to different outcomes. You may find it useful to map out several steps in the causal chain that you expect your readers usually follow ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D$) so that you can identify the point of disagreement and provide evidence to support your alternate version ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow P \rightarrow Q$).

Finally, writers making causal arguments need to provide specific evidence to demonstrate the likelihood of each step in a process. If you skip steps or move too quickly through them—"Since the tornado destroyed 10% of houses in Arcadia this spring, it's obvious that our summer tourism income will drop by 50% over the next five years"—you will lose credibility. You may rely on measurable data (how many summer rental houses were destroyed), relevant comparisons (the revenue problems of a similar town after a tornado five years ago), or carefully mapped extrapolations (since surveys show tourists choose this town primarily for its 1970s vibe, replacement houses may be less attractive). The more carefully you can map out and support a sequence of events, the more persuasive you will be.

Causal argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Analyzing the complexity of a situation or decision
- Identifying events or situations that need additional research or study before new action is taken
- Uncovering the backstory or generalizations that complicate other arguments

Causal argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You don't have credible data to support each step you identify in the chain of events
- You want to describe the value or benefits of a situation without being distracted by discussions of blame or liability
- You want to help readers explore possible ideas without getting caught up in precisely how they will work

Causal argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: lab reports, accident site analyses, analyses of historical events, medical research, sports journalism, financial planning, environmental studies.

Policy arguments respond to readers' values and resistances

Writers who want to change the world around them compose arguments that recommend solutions, actions, or policies for readers to adopt. At a national level, writers might propose a new environmental law; at a local level, writers might propose a new policy for speed limits on campus. Even at a personal level, you can see how job applications, plans for a start-up business selling handmade toys, and even marriage proposals all argue that someone should value you and take new action based on that value. Persuading readers to change their actions or their fundamental principles is often more difficult than asking them to agree that a laser printer is cost-effective or that eating too much fast food causes health problems. So people who write proposals and recommendations for change need to understand their own arguments and also prepare counterarguments for readers who might be skeptical or resistant to change.

Policy arguments often include evaluative arguments: writers need to demonstrate that a change will lead to "good" behavior, security, or progress. Because we know that readers resist change, writers need to choose criteria that closely match what readers already value: for example, your job application will emphasize skills that a specific employer needs in order to convince them to hire you. Policy arguments also often include cause-effect arguments: writers need to provide evidence to show how the new policy or action will lead, step by step, to the promised results. Skeptical readers may agree that a change would be beneficial (when drivers slow down, pedestrians on campus are less at risk) but they may still wonder whether a few signs or speed bumps would really cause all drivers to slow down.

In order to recommend a new policy or solution, writers will need to:

- Demonstrate how or why the current situation is problematic: if readers don't see a problem, they won't make an effort to change
- Identify and write to an audience that has the power to make or assist with a change

- Provide a clear plan of action with evidence that the plan is reasonable and feasible
- Respond to readers' strongest objections: will readers think the change conflicts with their principles, uses too much of their time or money, or requires too much effort for the benefits they will receive?

If a change were obvious and easy, it would already be adopted: writers generally don't need to argue that people should wear warmer clothes when it's cold outside. Writers who argue for change need to provide vivid examples and credible evidence that connect directly to readers' own goals, values, and abilities—and directly address and refute readers' protests.

Policy argumentation is particularly useful for:

- Addressing complicated issues that directly affect readers' lives
- Using your writing expertise to help readers move from dissatisfaction to positive action
- Taking an evaluative or causal argument to the next level of action and change

Policy argumentation can be counterproductive when:

- You don't yet know why your readers might be skeptical or resistant to change
- You don't have time or knowledge to fully address readers' resistances, or readers don't have time or power to make a change
- You want to describe a situation to connect with readers but you're not yet ready to suggest improvements

Policy argumentation moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: grant or project proposals, annual budgets, purchasing recommendations, opinions or op-eds, campaign speeches and political platforms, and personnel reviews.

Practice

- To practice **evaluative** arguments, see [Believing/Doubting](#) or [Out On a Limb](#).
- To practice **causal** arguments, see [Advertisement Analysis](#) or [Cause-Effect Map](#).
- To practice **policy** arguments, see [Elevator Speech](#) or [Evil Genie](#).
- To practice **anticipating reader resistance**, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Reason Appallingly](#).



Learn

- To learn more about **argumentation as a large-project goal** rather than a single move, see [Chapter 17, Developing Projects that Argue](#).
- To learn more about **refutation** as a part of argumentation, see [Chapter 18, Developing Projects that Propose Change](#).



14.8 Synthesis

Synthesis moves require writers to combine ideas from different sources, voices, perspectives, and/or fields, in a way that both summarizes the information and creates a new perspective. If you’ve ever heard the saying, “The whole is greater than just the sum of its parts,” you’ve heard a description of synthesis work. This writing move is not just about arranging the pieces, but about drawing connections so that readers have an “aha!” moment that could not come from just looking at one piece or another.

While most writers use description and argument regularly in our daily lives, we typically don’t have as much experience with formal synthesis. However, if you recently checked several websites for reviews of the latest smartphone so that you could tell your cousin which one to buy, you were using synthesis. Student writers are most likely to encounter synthesis moves in writing projects that draw on information from multiple articles or books, like a researched argument about generative artificial intelligence bots or a proposal about responding to local flooding. In the workplace, you might need to combine information from several branch office annual reports as you do an efficiency analysis to recommend which offices to expand or close.

Thinking about each of these cases, you can see how many steps are involved: synthesis writers need to identify what information readers need, locate credible sources, understand the information from each source, select and arrange the most relevant and engaging information, and draw a reasonable conclusion that makes one “big picture” from all of the parts. Sometimes writers think of synthesis as describing and joining a conversation, in order to imagine how all the parts fit together.

Synthesis requires accurate representation of others’ perspectives

Synthesis writing draws on some of the same strategies that summary writing does. You might find that summarizing each source helps you prepare for synthesis, since one goal is to accurately represent the arguments and evidence of each voice or perspective that you include. As in the case of summary, synthesis writers need to read critically so that they fully understand each component

source. Writers will often use a blend of paraphrased information and integrated quotations to represent key ideas from each source.

Synthesis writers need to strive for three additional kinds of accuracy.

- Writers need to give a **complete** representation. Sometimes it is obvious what “complete” means: a manager needs to read and include information from reports of all seven branch offices, not just two or three. Other times, when you are investigating a new issue like the effects of local flooding, you won’t know the whole story at the start, and you will need to review multiple sources to identify what experts deem most relevant.
- Writers need to give a **credible** representation. At a basic level, each individual source needs to be trusted by your readers; you can also build trust by demonstrating that you are not relying only on one kind of source or perspective.
- Writers need to give a **proportional** representation. If you find a dozen sources that demonstrate how climate change influences flooding and one source that argues that flooding is not related to larger climate issues, you cannot refer to just one source from each perspective if you want to provide an accurate representation.

Synthesis writing is thus not about finding a particular number of sources. To have credible coverage of an issue, you will often need to gather more information at first than you need to include in your project, and then select the most useful combination of perspectives.

Synthesis requires integration of the writer’s views with other sources

Synthesis writing draws on some of the same strategies that argument writing does, because writers need to create a new perspective. Although synthesis strives for accuracy and balance, it is not truly objective writing: by selecting or not selecting a source, by including or not including some information, you are influencing readers to see a particular picture. You will thus find it helpful to identify your main goal and your readers’ needs: do you want to emphasize an established position or set the foundation for creating a new argument? will you write for professional readers who want a quick overview or resistant readers who need in-depth evidence? You should design an initial plan or working thesis early in your writing process, in order to guide you in locating relevant, credible sources.

As a synthesis writer, you can try out different approaches: you might want to:

- **Demonstrate a significant consensus.** For example, you could integrate data from several years’ worth of state and county reports to persuade readers that the flooding caused by King Tides in southern Florida is

costing taxpayers significant money. (Writers can use signal words such as *Similarly*, *Likewise*, *In addition*, and *Moreover* to show how ideas add up to a big picture.)

- **Identify trends in a professional conversation** or reveal gaps in understanding. For example, you could connect election-year reporting from several online news sites to show which kind of voters are most often quoted, and which groups of voters are being left out of the reports. (Writers can use signal words such as *In addition*, *Generally*, or *Frequently* to show trends and signals such as *However*, *On the other hand*, or *Instead* to indicate a contradiction or gap.)
- **Create new understandings** by linking contrasting ideas or drawing from different fields. For example, you could connect sociological research on how communities respond to epidemics to medical research about how vaccines provide disease immunity in order to recommend an effective response to a new disease outbreak. (Writers can use signal words such as *Likewise*, *In the same way*, or *Furthermore* to represent connections and signals such as *For instance* or *As a result* to show deeper connections.)

In synthesis, writers emphasize our own perspective through selection, arrangement, and use of framing statements. In your recommendation about buying a smartphone, you might select information about speed and battery life for your cousin who travels a lot for business, and include less information about cameras. Your arrangement should also help readers spot your priorities: instead of describing ideas from one source at a time, try to use a point-by-point organizational structure based on key ideas or high-priority data. In a report on efficient branch offices, you could draft a section about annual profits and then a section about numbers of clients served, rather than describing each office one at a time.

Finally, you can use framing statements to help readers see patterns and draw the most important connections: depending on the genre, these sentences often come at the starts and/or conclusions of paragraphs or sections. In your analysis of King Tide flooding, you might introduce one section by indicating the points experts agree on, and introduce a second section by pointing out areas where further research needs to be done.

NOTE: Alternate between reading and writing. Sometimes novice writers are tempted to write their ideas first, and then go look for sources that support them. That approach emphasizes your own contribution, but it can lower your accuracy: you might not look for voices that could add to or even contradict your assumptions, and so your synthesis would be incomplete. Other novice writers plan to do all their reading and notetaking first and then write up the results.

That approach can give you a broad picture of others' ideas, but it can diminish your own contribution. After reading lots of detailed reports by knowledgeable experts, even advanced writers can lose track of our own ideas or goals, or lose confidence in our ability to add to the conversation, and so we fall into a “summary trap” of repeating others' ideas in no particular order rather than writing true synthesis.

The best synthesis writing comes from a recursive process, in which writers go back and forth—several times—between reading others' ideas and identifying their own conclusions. You may need to gather a few sources and then step back to consider your goals and your readers' needs: do your findings still fit with your goals, and are you directly stating your conclusions? You may want to draft the first section of a synthesis and then stop and check: are you drawing on a credible and proportional set of source material, or do you need to locate better information? Your recursive process will help you fully integrate and balance multiple perspectives.

Use synthesis to re-present a complex issue

Synthesis writing is especially good for:

- Condensing in-depth research to share with a busy or inexperienced reader
- Demonstrating the breadth of consensus about an issue to reassure a skeptical reader
- Identifying gaps in current experts' understanding of an issue to justify a new line of investigation
- Assisting novices in adapting to new situations and learning new concepts

Synthesis writing is counterproductive when:

- Most or all sources say the same thing, and so you have nothing new to add
- Readers are too busy or too inexperienced to want all the details and just need recommendations
- You don't understand what the experts in the field are explaining well enough to share it with readers
- You don't have time or resources to identify diverse and credible sources

Synthesis moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: scholarly journal articles (especially any “literature review” sections), textbooks and guidebooks, corporate or organization reports, grant proposal justifications, and best-of-the-year reports on movies, music, or sports.

Practice

- To practice **preparing** for synthesis by collecting and organizing information, see [Date My Topic](#), [Evidence Shopping List](#), or [Source Synthesis Grid](#).
- To practice **structuring and generating** your synthesis writing, see [Subtopic Generator](#) or [They Say + I Say](#).



Learn

- To learn more about **active reading** strategies that can help you prepare for synthesis, see [Chapter 6, Reading as a Writer](#).
- To learn more about using **signal words** to improve cohesion in your synthesis, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **integrating source material** into your own synthesis writing, see [Chapter 22, Integrating and Acknowledging Sources](#).



14.9 Exploration

Exploratory writing borrows from narration, explanation, and argument: writers may draw on a personal experience or story, and they often plan to demonstrate a point. However, writers who are exploring will focus on hypotheses and possibilities rather than only measurable facts. Instead of just narrating the events from your recent vacation in Guyana and showing how they have already changed your perspective, you might predict the *possible* long-term effects on your views, consider how a similar experience *might* affect other college students, or *investigate* some reasons why the idea of “vacation” could be complicated when people from rich nations visit locations with high local poverty levels. Exploratory writing should engage readers and stretch their understanding without being so vague or outlandish that they doubt its credibility.

Exploratory writing is most common in texts that consider how people experience their world: in these documents, writers may associate a concrete experience (starting college) with a more philosophical question (what does it mean to be “educated”?), or in projects where writers extrapolate from current events to hypothesize about human nature, social mores, ecological relationships, or innovative solutions. The first writers to examine an obvious problem like youth obesity and then propose how a tax on soft drinks might improve young people’s health were exploring that idea without any way to know if it would actually work.

You may find that exploratory writing is most useful to you as a generative approach that helps with your initial thinking on a project or helps you get un-stuck in the middle of a longer project. But exploratory writing also has a valid place

even in formal academic, scientific, or professional writing: when someone asks you to “think outside of the box” for a proposal, a hypothesis, a design plan, or the recommendations section of your research report, you might well respond with exploratory writing rather than expository or argumentative moves.

Exploration features connections and suggestions

Exploratory writing is characterized by association and suggestion. Writers often consider connections that aren’t immediately obvious: instead of describing a rainy day by identifying common items like puddles and umbrellas, an exploratory writer might associate the same rain with particular memories or emotions from childhood, with a concept of seasonality or change, with other kinds of water present in our daily lives, with other ways that people seek shelter from discomfort, or with the possibilities of drought or flooding that have occurred or may occur over a long period of time. A writer exploring a recent vacation might use question prompts such as *who*, *where*, *when*, and *why* to draw connections to other people who vacation, other places that people travel to, other times when people have traveled or will travel, and other reasons people give for traveling, whether for business or pleasure.

Exploratory writing usually has a goal or a point, but may not state that point as directly as argumentative writing does. Often writers begin with a question or an area of inquiry rather than with a claim or a recommendation, and conclude with a suggestion for next steps rather than a certainty about what’s right. When you explore to improve your own understanding, you may find it’s easier to keep an open mind if you aim to generate several different suggestions rather than aim for a single solution. When you decide to share exploratory writing with readers, you can incorporate more implicit claims and concept-based arguments: instead of starting a section of writing with a direct claim and evidence for your decision, you might use a more open-form paragraph structure that starts by identifying several options and closes by helping readers focus on one or more new ideas.

Exploration represents risky thinking reasonably

Exploratory writers need to tolerate and even enjoy risk-taking. A writer who concludes that “good friends are worth their weight in gold,” for instance, takes few risks: both the writer and the reader likely agreed with that idea from the start. Although you may not think of yourself as a “creative writer,” at least not in terms of writing in genres such as fiction or poetry, you know that all writers and leaders benefit from using strategies to think and write creatively about important issues. Fortunately, research shows that you can increase your creativity by deliberately practicing exploratory thinking.

- **Seek unusual angles or perspectives.** Once you have studied an idea enough to know the most typical ideas or scenarios, seek approaches that differ: draw on what's uncommon about your own experience; consider how people distant from you in location, age, or time would think; re-frame a question by emphasizing what is often hidden or missing.
- **Consider provocative combinations.** Just as a description of a peanut-butter-and-pickle sandwich will engage readers who might be bored with a peanut-butter-and-jelly scenario, you can experiment with unusual connections: pick two people, two actions, two professions, or two principles that don't usually appear together and explore how they might have relevant connections.
- **Exaggerate or invert the current scene.** Explore a problem or scenario by exaggerating it (imagine it as being many times better or worse, much larger or smaller) or even converting it to an opposite scene (imagine that an election result is reversed, a tragedy never happened, or a fundamental force like gravity is absent).
- **Set more or fewer limits.** Consider new options by changing the boundaries: give yourself only 50 words or challenge yourself to write 500 words very quickly; assume you have unlimited funding or only \$10 to solve a problem; consider the impact of an idea on a single five-year-old or a whole country; design a policy that nobody—or everybody—would object to.
- **Manage your dispositions.** Support your exploratory thinking by starting early so that you can step away and then come back later to a project; by changing your context through exercise, new experiences, or travel (even just to the other side of campus); and by telling yourself encouraging stories to improve your confidence and motivation.

To balance out risky ideas, exploratory writers can use careful progression, extrapolated support, and hedge language so that readers don't dismiss the ideas as random or fantastical. Exploration usually progresses in steps rather than leaps: a writer could move from describing today's rain to the memory of a sad rainy day to the concept of sadness to a discussion of medications for depression, rather than jumping from rain straight to Prozac. In addition, when writers cannot argue convincingly that X always leads to Y, they can argue that *something similar to X* has led to *something similar to Y*. The fact that residents of one small Appalachian town lost weight when they were advised to drink 1% rather than whole milk certainly does not prove that a New York City law banning supersized sugary drinks will have beneficial health effects for all eight million New Yorkers, but it does suggest how public policy can influence healthy behavior. By extrapolating from a single known situation to a broader unknown problem, though, a writer can reduce readers' skepticism.

Finally, writers can suggest that X *often* leads to Y or that X *might in some cases* lead to Y. Hedge language—words like *might*, *could*, *possible*, *many/some*, *often*, *a little/somewhat*, *suggest*, or *imply*—can be used in moderation to allow exploratory writers to go a little further out on a limb without making a firm claim that they cannot fully support. (Do you spot the hedge language in this paragraph about writing?)

NOTE: Avoid exploratory shortcuts. Exploratory writing is an intense example of how writers learn while we write rather than only representing knowledge we have already acquired. While it's easier and faster to write about what you already know or agree with, doing so will shortcut your learning and leave your readers less surprised and thus less engaged. As an explorer, you can directly challenge your own opinions by asking *what if* the most flawed idea, experience, or solution you know of is more reasonable than you currently believe it is?

You should also strive to consider known unknowns and even unknown unknowns: when you repeatedly ask yourself *what else* could be relevant, intriguing, or plausible, you can identify more provocative or creative connections or recommendations. Most importantly, you have to be willing to *change your mind* if you hope to represent truly new thinking. Once you identify an unfamiliar concept or approach, you may need to pause in your speculations to gather more information, but your time investment will pay off in more original, compelling, and memorable ideas.

Use exploration to increase innovation and emotional connection

Exploratory writing is particularly good for:

- Suggesting the broader implications of your conclusions or recommendations
- Engaging readers' imaginations and emotions in support of a large project or movement
- Creating a more original or attention-grabbing perspective so you can stand out when writing about a familiar issue
- Starting a project or trying to solve a tricky thought-problem

Exploratory writing can be counterproductive when:

- Readers expect factual or familiar information
- You need to convince readers of the practicality of your ideas or recommendations
- You do not have time or confidence to present fresh, risky alternatives
- You need to do so much hedging and qualifying that you undercut your ideas

Exploration moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: grant proposals, business plans, memoirs, research study conclusions, travelogues, philosophical treatises, and vision statements.

Practice



- To practice exploring **your own perspectives** thoroughly, see [3D Mind Map](#), [Assumption Inspection](#), [Believing/Doubting](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Evil Genie](#), [Inner Three-Year-Old](#), [Old Wine / New Bottles](#), [Out On A Limb](#), or [Question Ladders](#).
- To practice exploring perspectives that **other readers may provide**, see [Audience Profile](#), [Cousin Topics](#), [Genre Switch](#), [Keyword Bingo](#), or [Stance Switch](#).

Learn



- To learn more about how to select **new perspectives** for your exploration, see [Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project](#).
- To learn more about writing a **thesis or focal statement** for your exploration, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **surveying known and unknown information** regarding your explanation, see [Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions](#).

14.10 Reflection

Reflective or metacognitive writing moves require looking inward: *metacognitive* means “thinking about your thinking.” While you would use exploratory moves to *change* your mind, you would use reflective writing moves to *understand* your own mind. Writers often know our own opinions very well, but we don’t always understand our motivations, our assumptions, or our opportunities. In everyday discussion, people often connect reflection with emotions; however, writers also often use reflection to monitor choices, preferences, and processes. Because reflection is inward-looking, writers often reflect with ourselves as the main audience, but we can share our reflective knowledge with others to give them a “behind the scenes” understanding of our work. The more you understand how you make decisions and engage with complicated tasks, the easier it will be to keep doing actions that benefit you (like addressing your audience’s needs) and change those that hold you back (like obsessing over errors in an early draft).

You may be most familiar with reflection as a move that looks backward in time: it’s easiest for writers to consider the thinking that we already have completed. But reflection is not just about the past: writers should also use reflection to monitor

decisions in the middle of a project, as well as to predict what kind of steps or decisions will need to be made in the future. Indeed, the overall goal of reflective writing is future-oriented: writers reflect in order to make better decisions in upcoming situations, and sometimes to encourage others to make better decisions. The exercises in this book frequently ask you to write reflectively about how you write, so that both your successes and your challenges as a writer seem less mysterious, more controllable, and more transferable (or revisable) for future writing projects.

Reflective writing connects specific events to reasons

You can use reflection the way a detective would, to investigate the exact steps that led to your success, so you can repeat them, or the steps that led to a problem or failure, so you can change your actions. In complex tasks, success can be determined by very slight variations in practice, like a ski-jumper's timing or a botanist's decision about the humidity level in a greenhouse. So you will want to start by describing *exactly what* happened or could happen to you: what choices did you make, what actions did you take, and what products did you complete? Take time to map out as many separate steps as possible, so you can pinpoint a crucial decision—and use the language experts use to help you identify exact moves. For instance, instead of just saying, “Then I did my research,” divide that step into multiple smaller steps, from deciding what to search for to locating texts to reading and taking notes. You might narrow your vision even further, describing what keywords or databases you used when you searched, and how long you spent. As an advanced writer, you might also note whether you adapted your inquiry to meet the audience or genre of your project.

After identifying *what* you did, you also need to explore *why* and *how* you made that choice. You might start with generalized or surface-level reasons such as “I ran out of time” or “That’s how I had always done it.” For your reflection to be most useful, though, you need to ask a second or even third level of *why* questions: why did you run out of time? why were you allocating less time to one task than another? how did you feel when you were in the middle of the experience? Throughout this process, try to be as honest as possible, and don’t let yourself off the hook: in order to control your actions, you need to know your reasons for acting one way or another. Remember that your goal isn’t to hide your failures, but to fail productively: to reflect on how you can improve for next time.

Reflective writing examines reasons and predicts improvements

A key goal of reflective writing is to improve your practice. So as you wrap up, you might explore the options or consequences by asking, “So, what next?” What resources or strategies could you consider next time, and what reasons could you give yourself to make a change? Since few of us change without understanding

why we should change, you should keep your detective hat on and reconsider your reasons. Perhaps you have a “good reason” for every action—but if you’re not completely satisfied with all of your results, then you need to use your reflection to identify what to change. In addition to checking for any logical fallacy or unconscious bias, you might also raise questions about:

- A reason that is just a habit rather than a decision: “I’ve always done it this way”
- A reason that is out of date or out of place: “This always worked for me in my other school/class/job”
- A reason that you were given rather than one you chose: “My teacher/parent/boss/friend said to do it this way”

Reflective writing gives you an opportunity to make a new choice that suits you, matches your current task, and is supported by strong evidence.

Once you understand your choices and motivations more clearly, a final step in reflective writing is to consider what actions you should take. You might use a “KQS” approach: what do you want to *keep* doing that is helping you succeed? what do you want to *quit* doing because it’s not effective? and what do you want to *start* doing because it could lead to more success? Change can be difficult, so be realistic: give yourself a reasonable first step or two, and explain how you can commit to that step and what you expect the results to be, so your reflection gives you power rather than making you feel even more overwhelmed.

NOTE: Reflect like an engineer. If you’re not used to reflective writing moves, they can feel uncomfortable, difficult, or even irrelevant: why should you share your innermost feelings with strangers, or waste time explaining how you did something instead of putting extra time into the finished product that actually matters? It may help to think of reflection as less about feelings and more about structures or systems.

Engineers, for instance, know that if there’s a flaw in the underlying structure, a glitch in the baseline system, or a weak link in a core process, the whole project will be at best inefficient and at worst completely ineffective. So it’s worth time to examine those foundations very carefully, even if they won’t be directly visible in the final product or event. Likewise, research shows that people who reflect frequently on their choices and decisions—before, during, and after their work—can learn to spot weaknesses and inefficiencies more accurately so that they become faster, more precise, more adaptable, and more effective at what they do, whether they’re athletes, scientists, politicians, or writers.

Use reflection to improve and plan

Reflective writing is particularly good for:

- Identifying past successes and failures to improve your own future performance
- Uncovering assumptions or motivations that are limiting your success
- Generating empathy with your readers about how difficult change is
- Preparing to take on a new and difficult project

Reflective writing can be counterproductive when:

- Readers expect factual or data-based information
- Readers' situations are so different from yours that your experience isn't relevant
- You do not remember your own decisions specifically enough to investigate them
- You are happy with your performance and have no need to improve or alter it

Reflection moves are found in multiple academic and professional documents: committee action plans, progress reports, coaching talks at halftime, project “post-mortem” evaluations, self-assessments for annual performance reviews, recommendations for further research, motivational speeches, artists' statements, and portfolio introductions.

Practice

- To practice **generating initial reflections**, see [Attitude Inventory](#), [Gaining a Growth Mindset](#), [Letter to Kermit](#), [They Say + I Say](#), [Used To Think / Now I Think](#), [Values Freewrite](#), or [Write The Problem](#).
- To practice **gaining further insights** through reflection, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Inner Three-Year-Old](#), [Mind the Gap](#), or [Reason Appallingly](#).



Learn

- To learn more about **productive failure** and other habits of mind that support reflection and metacognition, see [Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits](#).
- To learn more about reflective writing as an integral part of your composing process, see [Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process](#).

