Chapter 15. Developing Projects that Explain

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require exposition
- Explore writing strategies that support exposition
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing explanations

For some writing situations, or some parts of writing situations, your overarching goal will be to **explain information, experiences, processes, or concepts that you**

understand fairly well, in such a way that readers who are unfamiliar with your experiences and knowledge come to understand them just as well as you do. In a school assignment, your stance may be a little different: you might write to someone who already knows the information (such as your instructor) in order to demonstrate your own comprehension. However, your goal will still be to provide sufficient information to support readers' understanding.

Before people commonly shared photographs and videos, we needed writers to explain everything. Only a talented writer could "show" hundreds of people an exotic vacation spot, the steps to fixing your bathroom sink, the conditions of workers in a meat processing plant, or the challenges of competing in an Olympic marathon. In our new information-rich, multimedia world, writers who *only* explain are less in demand—but all writers still need to be able to explain our ideas or experiences.

Advanced writers who are focusing on explanation can keep several threshold concepts in mind:

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.

Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Writing creates and integrates knowledge

Writing is about representing what you already know, and also about creating new knowledge through the act of putting words onto a page or screen.

Since writing creates knowledge rather than just reporting on it, you should note that an explanation is always *a little bit of an argument*. By selecting some details and omitting others, you present a *version* of the answer that you want readers to accept, so it's rarely entirely "objective." But the main goal of explaining what we know, do, or believe is to provide enough information to have readers say, "I understand" or "I see what you mean." When you are explaining a key concept or event in depth, then, you will need to answer the question, "How much information is enough?"

Because sharing information is a common goal of written communication, we have many words to identify slight variations or emphases: *explain*, *narrate*, *describe*, *illustrate*, *summarize*, *define*, *discuss*, and more. Rather than being concerned about nuances as you begin a project, you might find it helpful to make one initial decision: to identify whether you are conveying information about a process that unfolds over time or giving an overview of a relatively stable moment, object, or concept.

When you are explaining or narrating how events occur across time, you may find that making decisions about the breadth and depth of your coverage is straightforward. Whether you are writing about a trip you took, a laboratory experiment you conducted, or a rally you attended, the event probably has a beginning, middle, and end—and it may have steps or subsections you could address one at a time. You can then decide to give *an even distribution of information* (the same amount of detail about the first speech at the rally as the final speech), or provide information at *variable depths* (more information about the rally speeches by famous people than by local organizers).

Although the word *narrative* may seem to cover only personal writing, you may find you have opportunities to narrate or explain many kinds of events, such as:

- Your personal observations of a daily commute, championship game, family reunion, or first day of school
- Your professional observations of a client interview, surgical procedure, or composing process
- Your expert instructions ("how to") for driving to campus, cooking chicken masala, focusing a microscope, reconciling a budget, or increasing a website's visibility

When you are explaining or describing more stable concepts, scenes, objects, or texts, you may have more choices about what to include. Of course, if your goal is to summarize a text, then your outer boundaries may be already determined, just as they are in describing a rally, and you need only decide whether to do an even representation or describe some elements in more depth than others.

In many cases, though, you will also need to make your own informed choice about the boundaries of your subject: do you describe a whole town from east to west? do you profile a local politician's whole life starting with childhood? or do you select a smaller focal area that is most relevant to your expertise, your goals, and your readers' interests? As you consider each of the explanation situations below, imagine how you might expand or narrow the scope of your attention:

- Describe the sights, sounds, and smells of (part of) a neighborhood, vacation destination, research site, restaurant, or crime scene.
- Explain (some of) the details that distinguish one building, beaker, bicycle, or biryani from another.

- Summarize the (most important) examples, facts, and/or arguments of a textbook chapter, court case, medical history, or campaign speech.
- Define (one aspect of) a technical term, slang word, legal concept, prohibited behavior, scholarly theory such as *behaviorism* or *intersectionality*, or abstract concept such as *courage* or *success*.

It's important to know that even writers who have been telling stories or explaining concepts for decades get stuck: we may have a head full of information, but no reliable way to know how much of it, or which parts of it, to include as we write. Particularly as the ideas and experiences we explain become more complex, we may have to make difficult decisions about how to keep our readers fully engaged and informed. This chapter will help you explore key strategies that explainers use and guide you to reflect on your options at each stage of your project, so that you have the skills to successfully navigate the process of narrating or explaining.

Explore 15.1

Review the lists above for ideas, and note down 3-5 times you have explained an unfolding event or a more stable concept to someone recently. What was the most difficult explanation to complete, and what made it challenging?

Learn

- To learn more about distinguishing among strategies for narration, description, summary, and definition, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.

15.1 How Much is Enough? Exploring Fundamental Exposition Strategies

Explaining, describing, or narrating what you already (mostly) know can seem like the simplest of writing tasks. Indeed, you may identify this kind of writing with texts from your very early days as a writer: telling stories about summer vacation, describing pets or books you read, reporting on presidents or turtles or famous inventions. So you may be inclined simply to "start writing" in this familiar approach.

However, as an advanced writer, you will benefit from taking time to explore challenges that explainers face, and strategies that they commonly use. Your previous instructors may have encouraged you to expand your approaches by suggesting that you "Show, don't tell" or "Write about what you know about" or "Say more!" Perhaps you found comments like these helpful, or perhaps they left you wondering why such simple advice—"just say more (but not too much)!"— was

so hard to follow successfully. After all, if you had known what "more" you needed to say, you'd have said it already, right?

Although it may seem to only involve basic common sense, even explaining simple concepts or narrating everyday experiences requires you to adopt strategies to solve three fundamental problems of written communication:

- **Strategy 1**: Write for readers who cannot read your mind.
- **Strategy 2**: Write for readers are always reading their own minds and relying on their own assumptions.
- **Strategy 3**: Attentively investigate sentences or explanations that seem "clear" but may be imprecise or insufficient.

To be a successful explainer, then, you need to be an investigator of your readers as well as your subject; you need to be a skeptic about how easy it is to modify someone's thinking; and you need to be a mediator who decides when to focus on your goals, when to focus on readers' needs, and especially where those goals and needs overlap.

Anticipate non-telepathic readers

How do you take something that's in your head and transport it accurately and vividly to someone else's head, *using primarily words* on a screen or page, when you may never even have met them? Developing powerful strategies to solve the "no telepathy" problem is a core challenge for most advanced writers. One example that may help you think about it comes from a very, very short science fiction story by E. Michael Blake published many years ago in a collection called *100 Great Science Fiction Short Short Stories* and titled "Science Fiction for Telepaths."

This is the entire story, just six words: **"Aw, you know what I mean."**

You can imagine the telepathic readers in a galaxy far, far away responding enthusiastically. "Aha, good one!" they might say, grinning and slapping their six knees with their eight hands. "The part about how the pseudo-dog jumped out the smazteenth-story window, grew a pair of blue buntle-wings and flew all the way to Pafflemagnt was excellent!" Because they read the writer's mind, they all immediately really did know all the exact details of the story without the writer including another word.

If we could read each other's minds, writing would be a lot easier (though other things might be more complicated!). Instead, in our non-telepathic world, we misunderstand each other frequently. It makes sense that we might misunderstand each other about complex topics such as international politics or nuclear fission. But the no-telepathy problem can pop up in very ordinary circumstances. Maybe you remember that sometimes you can be telling your best friend on this

planet a completely normal story about how your boss annoys you so much, and when you say, "You know what I mean?" sometimes your best friend says "No," and you have to explain it all over again.

This gap between what we know and what readers know is especially hard for writers because when we write and read our own writing, we are also reading our own minds. So what we wrote *plus what we remember* is clear to us. It is very hard to get out of our own brains and imagine how someone who can only see the words on the page will understand them. Without that imaginative leap, though, we can't even start to answer the question, "How much explanation is enough?"

Writers who want to explain their knowledge need to learn as much as possible not just about the subject, but about readers—either the very specific readers we know will engage with our writing, or the strangers who we imagine will encounter our text in the future. We need to uncover what readers know already, what they want or need to know, and how they will use that knowledge. Then we can rephrase the key question: "How much is enough *for these readers to be satisfied*?"

Adapt to readers' already-busy brains

Part of what you and your best friend may be running into is the state of *their* brain. When you say "my boss" and "annoys me," your friend's mind immediately fills up with *their* boss (who may just have given everyone a raise) or with *their* most recent experiences of being annoyed (which may have more to do with a younger sibling playing music too loudly than any workplace situation). Even if a friend says confidently, "I know just what you mean!" they could still be misunderstanding you. Since their mind is so full of their prior ideas, you will have to work extra hard to move your own ideas in, like squeezing your favorite bright orange chair in among all your roommate's plain brown furniture.

It turns out that many readers are happy with their own thoughts and assumptions, and are not ready to put in the effort to change. (Think of all the people who are certain they can figure out how to assemble a bookshelf or implement a new software application without reading all the instructions—even when the instructions are comprehensive and accessible.) In addition to learning and predicting what readers know, explainers have to account for readers' inertia by providing ideas, images, and data that are compelling and comprehensive enough to be worth readers' time.

In other words, explainers need to be skeptical about the impact our words will have, and look for ways to enhance and strengthen our writing so that readers can't easily ignore us. This helps us craft another version of our question: "How much is enough *for these readers to want to make space for new ways of thinking or feeling*?"

Go beyond the "little green ball"

Finally, you may discover that the main tools you work with as a writer—words—have serious limitations. That's due in part to the fullness of readers' brains, but also to the ways in which language is slippery. I think of this as the "Little Green Ball" problem. If I write the sentence "I have a little green ball" up on a whiteboard or screen, would you *know what I mean*? Remembering the previous discussions, you should probably say, "No." After all, I know what's in my mind, and you know what's in yours, but the bridge between us may not connect yet.

You can try a few experiments to check how this bridge wobbles and slides: first, bring your hands up in front of you and measure out the size of this "little" ball. Can you measure out more than one size that would qualify? (If you try this in a classroom of your peers, you might be surprised at what other people's brains defined as "little"!) Next, try to imagine at least two kinds of "green." How about three kinds? Finally, can you list more than one kind of "ball" that could be little and green? You don't have to be a math major to start to see how many permutations can come from all those variables.

A subset of the Little Green Ball Problem is the Some People Problem, which may also get in the way of talking to your best friend. If you say, "Some days, some people at work just annoy me so much with some stuff they do, do know what I mean?" your friend cannot possibly truthfully answer, "Yes." Because of your vague language, the images and experiences in your head have not crossed the bridge to replace the images and experiences in theirs. Are you annoyed two out of thirty days, or four out of five? Is everyone at work grating on your last nerve, or just the person across the hall? Are you annoyed at someone chewing gum too loudly, or are you fed up with senior managers who tell racist "jokes" and expect everyone to laugh? If you want your friend to know what you mean, you need to provide one-time-only examples to help bring your exact images to life: "For example, one time last week my boss said ____."

Of course, writers always need to choose what we focus on: if we went into deep detail about everything, we'd never finish writing anything. If I were telling you a story about my boss and being annoyed, and a little green ball were just an incidental part of it, I wouldn't really care if you imagined a tennis ball or a golf ball or a cricket ball. And sometimes we want to be vague: the lyricist of that hit pop song everybody's humming along to this week actually does want you to imagine it's *your* broken heart (or first love) that the singer is going on and on about.

But if I wanted you to go to ToysToysToys! and buy me a replacement for the ball I'm holding in my hand right now, I would care very much about the details, and I would want to use precise enough language to move an exact enough image from my brain across the bridge to your brain: "I need a little green ball about an

inch in diameter, light neon green like highlighter ink and made of smooth shiny rubber with a slightly rough line running around its equator as if two halves were joined together. When I drop it on the tile floor, it should bounce back nearly as high as my hand and keep bouncing." (You should be starting to "see what I mean" by now.)

These days, I could take a video of my ball and send it to your phone—but that strategy wouldn't work to show you my annoying boss, much less to summarize the key factors of a juvenile court case or explain how telomeres function. If I really needed you to know how frustrating the people I work with are, I would have to explain one-time-only examples of their exact actions and utterances (like the one manager who spelled my name wrong in the clunky 2017 database and refused to correct it so it took eight weeks for me to get my $162 raise).

Above all, then, explainers need to mediate between our brains and readers' brains, and not settle for the first phrase that occurs to us—because the easiest words are often not the most precise. We need to know what feels important and engaging to us, but also consider how colleagues or even strangers might have different expectations or needs. So a final version of our central question might look like this: "How much is enough *for these readers to gain an accurate understanding of the most important and/or unfamiliar points?*"

For most advanced explanation and expression situations, writers still need to use language to solve common communication problems, and that means writers need to:

- Investigate readers' needs and aim to match those needs with explanations and evidence on the page rather than hoping they'll read our minds

- Stay skeptical about what seems obvious to us, and instead provide vivid information that will compel readers to move past their own minds and relive their own experiences

- Mediate between our goals and readers' needs, especially by using a range of strategies to ensure that we are providing sufficient, specific, one-time-only, audience-adapted information to begin to move images, stories, and concepts from our writer brains to the brains of our readers.

Explore 15.2

Describe an event from yesterday or a place you went last week using two or three sentences filled with general "little green ball" or "some people do some things some times" phrases. Then rewrite or add two sentences to explain more specifically what you saw or did. Practice using the starting phrase, "For example, one ___," which can encourage you to transfer exact details from your head to your document where readers can see them.

15.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Exposition Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as an explainer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop early insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to provide *vivid and accurate information that meets readers' needs* in your narration or explanation, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

Identify your goals and explore your readers' needs

The answer to "how much is enough?" depends on what you know, what your audience knows and is willing to learn, and what you need them to know. Once you investigate your readers, you should be able to predict what they most need to understand what you want to show them. Do they need the highest, most complete explanation right now, or should you simplify or narrow your presentation? It may also help to anticipate readers' attitudes: confident readers who have lots of experience can be as challenging to explain to as readers who have never thought about this issue or process before. Finally, you may want to explore how different stances can help build a bridge between your brain and your readers' brains: some readers will engage more deeply if you take a personal or exploratory stance, while readers in a different community or field may respond better to a formal tone and direct, concise explanations.

Explore the boundaries, emphasis, and order of your project

As you draft your document, consider how you can present compelling details without overwhelming your reader.

- **Exploring your boundaries** may be a straightforward process. In some cases, your subject matter will have one or more natural boundaries that you can adopt: events may be bounded by common units of time like a day or a week, or by their starting and finishing points, while places and objects are often clearly separated from their surroundings. In other cases, you may

have to choose how much you want to cover based on your goals and your readers' needs: if you are explaining a process or profiling a person, you may decide that you will have the strongest effect on readers by focusing on a small selection of that subject, or that readers need a broader overview.

- **Selecting your emphasis** depends on your goals: keep asking yourself what you *most* want readers to know or understand, and look for places where you can emphasize those concepts. Expository writing may be highly ordered or take a less direct path in engaging readers, but either way, readers will still need guiding statements to spot your main points. Remember also that you don't have to address all angles or subtopics in equal depth; you can provide more details about aspects that are important to you or difficult for readers, and fewer details about other aspects.
- **Choosing how to order an explanation** (from left to right? from start to finish? from least to most important?) may help you generate key ideas and help you connect the dots for your readers. Some explanations may fall into a linear order (from first to last, e.g.). In others, you will want to guide readers deliberately with your own point-by-point plan, perhaps moving between past and present, or building from easy to more complex ideas.

Once you have set your boundaries and focus, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial goal statement or thesis: most explanations and narratives use a concept-oriented approach to focusing readers' attention, but they vary widely in how direct and how complex their anchoring statements are.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to predict

- Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your explanation or narrative, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you've identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to outline or freewrite; to sketch out a map, diagram, or timeline; or to plan a writing and revising schedule that meets your needs. As an explainer, you may also find the exercises below particularly helpful.

> ### Practice
>
> - To practice identifying **your goals** for explaining, see <u>Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List</u>, <u>Backtalk</u>, or <u>Six Degrees</u>.
> - To practice identifying what your **readers** may want or need, see <u>Audience Profile</u>, <u>Audience/Stakeholder Mapping</u>, <u>Audience Switch</u>, or <u>Stance Switch</u>.
> - To practice determining your **boundaries, emphasis, and order**, see <u>Expand and Narrow</u>, <u>Explode a Moment</u>, <u>Inner Three-Year-Old</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, or <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.

15.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Exposition Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or "just doing it."

As you compose your explanation or narrative, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned (did your strategy help?).

In composing an explanation, you might find that you get stuck trying to inhabit your own brain *and* your readers' brains at the same time, so you might need to identify and explore each challenge separately. What do you want to say? What are readers expecting and ready to encounter? The strategies noted here can help you alternate between these approaches and work toward a reasonable answer to "How much is enough?"

Provide enough information to support your goals

When your explanation addresses what you consider to be the most vital points—the emotional high point of a narrative, for instance, or the crucial first steps of an experiment—you will need to include more detail than you might initially think is necessary, so that newcomers can "see what you mean." Explainers don't always remember all the relevant details right from the start, so for key points you may need to dig into your own memory for specific details, go back to review your records, and/or check with others who were involved. In some cases you may need to stop writing in order to do some additional research so that you have exact statistics or examples to share. On the other hand, you may decide (or peer readers may tell you) that some steps or sections aren't as important, and in those cases, you can provide fewer details. You may find it helpful to assess your own *motivation* for working on this project to help dig into the details, and also manage your disposition for *openness*, so that you see new options for connecting with readers.

Provide enough information to meet readers' needs and abilities

As you write and revise, you need to strive to see your writing from your readers' perspective. Your best option, of course, is to find a peer or two to review your draft, to ask any reviewers to be honest about whether they "know what you mean," and to be willing to take their advice. If you can't recruit a reviewer, you

need to imagine your way into your readers' brains. Remind yourself about what they already know and believe, where they are most different from you, and what they will most struggle with or doubt: you may even want to list these points separately so you don't overlook them. Then review your draft looking specifically at the most important or difficult sections to check whether you need more detail, and looking at other sections (even ones you personally connect with) to see whether they can be condensed or deleted so as not to distract readers.

To create a full explanation you will need to use a balance of confidence in what you know and curiosity about new angles that will connect with readers, and so you will also need time management to give you opportunities to get that balance just right.

Exercises to consider as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your explanation, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you are struggling to share what's in your own brain so that you have a powerful effect on someone else's way of thinking, you may also find the exercises below helpful.

Practice

- To practice generating **your best ideas** as you explain, see Best And Better, Elevator Speech, Explode A Moment, Off On A Rant, Scenarios, or Seven Generations.
- To practice adapting to **readers' needs** as you explain, see Add/Move/ Change/Delete, Assumption Inspection, Backtalk, or Inner Three-Year-Old.

15.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as an Explainer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work, using a DEAL structure: define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.

You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *explanatory* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful explanations require a keen attention to readers' needs, a skill that you may want

to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

Assess your insights to rebalance your explanations

Since you will often learn as you write, both about your topic or story and about your readers' needs, you will want to pause after completing an initial draft to rebalance your information. First, you may need to adjust the scope or boundaries: is your area of focus small enough that you can provide adequate detail for readers who cannot read your mind? Next, you can make more local adjustments: where can you add *more* information or vivid "one-time-only" examples to reinforce points that are vital to you, or expand on points that your readers may struggle with or be curious about? Where could you get by with *less*? You should look for places where you can cut back on—or even cut out!—material that might distract your readers from the central ideas, even if these sentences or paragraphs are interesting to you personally.

Some explanations take a "get right to business" approach: in summaries, instructions, or other professional documents, you can look for ways to revise your introduction or the starts of your paragraphs or sections to give up-front statements that focus readers' attention. In narratives or more exploratory texts, you may not have as many direct topic sentences or subheaders, but you can revise to use cohesion strategies like repeated words or phrases to help readers draw connections to key concepts, and transition phrases to help readers follow you across time and space.

Identify explanation strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you have attended to your own goals as a writer while staying aware of your readers' expectations and needs can help you transfer your expository skills to another project. All writers benefit from remembering that readers can't read our minds and don't think the way we do: whether you're writing a short social media post or a long annual report, deciding how much information is enough—for you, for your readers, and for your goals—is a valuable skill.

Completing your explanation or narrative has likely helped you discover new strategies or principles that can become part of your writing story. For instance, once you're aware of the shortcomings of "little green ball" or "some people do some things some times" language in communicating convincingly with readers, you can challenge yourself to improve your specificity in many kinds of writing projects.

You may also have gained insight into some of your strengths, preferences, and growth areas as a writer. Maybe you can see more clearly that you are a writer who initially says just a little and needs to stretch to provide sufficient detail, or a writer who likes to tell a long story that gives too much information readers don't need. Both of these can be great strategies for getting started with a writing project, especially now that you know how to rebalance your explanation during revisions.

Exercises and resources to consider as you reflect to improve

When you are trying to decide "how much is enough" in your explanation or narrative, you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, freewriting in a new document to help generate additional details, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find the exercises or resources below particularly helpful:

Practice

- To practice **identifying expository strategies** that may work for you in the future, see Add/Move/Change/Delete, Best and Better, Letter to Kermit, Shrunken Draft, or Ten Directed Revisions.

Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection.
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft.
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory.

15.5 Sample Writing Projects That Rely on Exposition

Experience-based writing projects: Comfortable spaces and good reads

Experience Project A: Describe a public place on campus that feels comfortable to you—however you define "comfortable." Since the answer to "how much information is enough?" depends on your reader, you should select a particular reader or community of readers to address, and use a genre that appeals to that reader: a letter to a family member, a short section for a campus guidebook for new students, a blog post for your school organization's website. Provide enough details that your readers can "see what you mean" even if their idea of "comfortable" doesn't match yours.

Practice

- To practice **defining and describing** a place your readers have never been, see Audience Profile, Explode a Moment, Inner Three-Year-Old, Scenarios, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
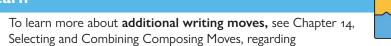
- - Narration to provide examples from your experience
  - Description and definition of what "comfortable" means to you
  - Evaluative argument to explain how this space meets your criteria for comfort, even if some readers might prefer another place
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Experience Project B: Explain how you responded to the best (or worst) part of a book, movie, or TV show you saw recently, so that your friends can decide whether to read or view it themselves. Don't write a *review* arguing that the overall story was good or bad; focus on describing what elements caused *you* to react, and explain how/why you responded. Since just telling what happened (the plot and scene) won't show your experience, you'll need to balance summary of the story with information about your responses, and perhaps also explain some of the values or experiences that made you respond that way. Consider your genre: planning for a social media post will be different from writing a short, humorous presentation for an open-mic night. Provide enough details about each element (the scene, the exact words or events, and your response) that readers can "see what you mean."

Practice

- To practice **explaining your reactions** to readers who can't read your mind, see Audience Profile, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Believing / Doubting, Explode a Moment, Inner Three-Year-Old, Scenarios, They Say + I Say, or Used to Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration to provide examples from your viewing experience
  - Summary of the specific scene(s) that had most impact
  - Evaluative argument to explain how this performance meets your criteria for excellence (or awfulness), even if some readers might disagree
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see
  - Chapter 6 on reading actively
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Writing-about-writing project: Literacy narrative

Explain how you came to be a reader and/or a writer, and connect that experience to your reading or writing practice today. You might focus on a single event as you were learning to read or write: a class, a text, a project you completed. Or you might focus on a sequence of events or influences that help you show what was particularly easy, challenging, or decisive for you as a reader and/or writer. You can focus on reading and writing generally, or on a specific type of literacy: how you became literate in a particular language, in a particular genre of reading/writing, or about a specific field (what might it mean to "become literate in Minecraft"?). Provide "enough" details about what happened and how you felt or responded that your peers can understand how your reading/writing experience differs from and connects with theirs. Draw conclusions as you go, or at the end, about how these earlier experiences might influence the approaches and decisions you make today as a reader and writer.

Practice

- To practice **explaining your literacies**, see Attitude Inventory, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Believing / Doubting, Dialogue, Gray-Area Finder, Inner Three-Year-Old, Remix/Mashup, Used To Think / Now I Think, or Write the Problem.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of one or more relevant past experiences and your responses
  - Description of specific events or texts
  - Reflection about how your past experiences and choices affect you today as a reader/writer
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your experiences, see
  - Chapter 19 on conducting self-based research
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Inquiry-based writing project: Field or profession introduction

Explain your major, your job, your profession, or a significant avocation (something more encompassing than just an occasional-time hobby) to someone who is considering joining or participating in it. Instead of recommending whether

to join or not, aim for a mostly neutral explanation that presents information outsiders don't usually see and acknowledges some key opportunities, complications, and challenges of the work. If you've been doing this work for a long time, beware of your "expert blind spot": try to remember what is confusing, difficult, and most useful for newcomers, and delve into details that will help them understand both the big picture and the daily events. If you're relatively new to your position, do your own research to check your understanding, and consider sharing your information with a person who has been in the area for a while to get their feedback.

Your final project may be primarily a text-based document, but consider whether readers would benefit from seeing graphs or visuals, having sections and subheaders to structure the information, or using sidebars or an abstract to help gain a quick understanding of key facts.

Practice

- To practice **explaining your field**, see Audience Profile, Authority / Curiosity / Annoyance List, Evidence Shopping List, Expert-Novice, Gray-Area Finder, Scenarios, Three Cubes, or Used To Think / Now I Think.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Narration of one or more relevant past or present experiences
  - Description of specific events, tasks, or people
  - Classification of the types of tasks, skills, or decisions required for work
  - Synthesis of source material to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your workplace or major, see
  - Chapter 5 on choosing and focusing a topic
  - Chapter 19 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 7 on implicit/explicit thesis statements and organizational patterns
  - Chapter 8 on designing multimodal documents
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style

Community-engaged writing project: Website (re)design

Design—or redesign—the key informational website pages for a local organization, real or hypothetical. You can choose a current campus group, community organization, or small business that doesn't yet have a (very good) website, or

you can imagine a plausible new organization that your school or city needs. You should plan to design a homepage, an "About Us" page, and at least one page that contains specialized information most users will want. If you (or someone on your team) is comfortable working with a site-building tool, you can use that, but it's fine to compose in a document, in a presentation or slide application, and/or using paper and pen; you can also include references to some elements you won't fully create ("Video of happy students goes here" or "The left menu pop-ups will include these items").

You should identify what the organization most wants to explain about itself, and what users most want to find out; if you're working for a real local organization, you may want to interview an employee or member, or survey possible users. Look at some websites for similar organizations to understand what's current and workable in the genre: layout, images, menus, links, tone and diction, and length. Focus most of your energy on selecting and providing the information that will help users understand and benefit from the organization's resources—if you create a beautiful website that doesn't answer users' questions, you won't help either the users or the organization.

Practice

- To practice **analyzing the genre needs**, see Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Genre Ethnography, or Map the Terrain.
- To practice **explaining the organization**, see 3D Mind Map, Evidence Shopping List, Expert-Novice, Subtopic Generator, Three Cubes.

Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves,** see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves, regarding
  - Summary of the organization's mission and/or resources
  - Description of people, work sites, or key events
  - Classification of the types resources or projects the organization is responsible for
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you explain your workplace or major, see
  - Chapter 19 on gathering primary and secondary data
  - Chapter 13 on analyzing and using genre patterns
  - Chapter 7 on organizational patterns
  - Chapter 8 on designing multimodal documents
  - Chapter 11 on editing to create an appropriate and consistent style