

Chapter 21. Late Inquiry: Addressing Gaps and Complications

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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify your needs for and strategies supporting your final searches for information
- Adapt your claims and analyses to compensate for information you cannot locate
- Evaluate the opportunities for new conclusions or recommendations regarding the issue you are studying
- Create new knowledge about your issue and share your insights with readers

In earlier years, when you finished a full draft of “a research paper” with some decent sources supporting your point, you might have stopped inquiring and just worked on editing. But advanced writers working on complex problems need to plan for one final round of inquiry.

Even though—or perhaps especially since—you may be feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally tired from the work on your writing project, you need to look for opportunities to finish your inquiry in a way that will help you reach your goals. Like a programmer running test cases of their completed code to discover where the bugs are, or a basketball coach giving their team some new strategies at halftime during a playoff game, writers can pause to make final adjustments once we’ve completed a full draft and can better identify whether what we have actually answered the questions we tell readers we will answer.

To conclude your inquiry rhetorically and reflectively, you will need to:

- **Gather** additional information or analysis that can help you give a complete and responsible representation of the issue
- **Evaluate** counterarguments, alternate perspectives, resistance points, and gaps in the current conversation that could be addressed
- **Write** to go beyond reporting or critiquing others' ideas and toward creating new knowledge
- **Revise** your current argument or focus to match it to the best information you've located

You might think of this late-stage inquiry as “hunting” research as opposed to the broader “gathering” research of the middle stage. It may require more or less effort depending on your exact project, but you shouldn't skip it entirely.

- **For a short or low-stakes inquiry project**—such as a blog post about best family activities in San Antonio—your final inquiry steps may involve a few fact-checks about current costs and perhaps a response to a query from a peer reviewer who suggests you consider options for families that include children with disabilities.
- **For a more complex or high-resistance inquiry project**—a proposal to a city council that they should build flood-protecting dunes in the next five years—your final steps may involve more interviews with local officials or business owners to prepare to respond to counterarguments that will arise, identifying more specific local budget plans, or reading more about the newest studies on long-term climate change and hurricane patterns.

Whether you need “one more quotation” or not doesn't depend on an abstract number assigned by a teacher, but on the goals you set for your writing and the ways you predict that your readers will react. Inquiry is always rhetorical, and late-stage researchers may benefit from keeping some key threshold concepts in mind:



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.



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.

Advanced writers often seek to create knowledge rather than just report it, and to do that, we need to identify opportunities to contribute a fresh perspective, new data, and/or original recommendations. In addition to revising your early draft, then, you will find it useful to revise some of your prior research strategies to best support your current goals and meet your final challenges.

21.1 Addressing Key Conflicts, Doubts, and Alternatives

All through your project, you have been trying to imagine the data you need to answer not just your “known unknowns” but your “unknown unknowns”: the questions, complications, and alternative viewpoints you did not know even existed when you first started. Now that you know more about your own goals and the larger conversation, you need to look carefully to spot the last few objections, confusions, or blind spots that prevent you from moving readers’ minds.

Writers often know, if we’re honest with ourselves, where we have provided vivid details or made a strong case, and where we are hoping readers just go along and don’t question us too much. As you review your draft, you may be concerned that the current data, information, or analysis is not as precise, engaging, or persuasive as you want it to be: after all, having *some* information is not the same thing as having *sufficient, credible, ethical, and effective* information.

Set your late-stage inquiry priorities and plans

You cannot answer all possible resistances about every small issue from every possible reader—and not all readers have time to sort through the details of every aspect of your proposal. Instead of just reading through your draft hoping something stands out to you as a glaring weakness in your evidence, you can focus your attention on some of the most common late-stage inquiry challenges.

Since you’re the boss of your project, you should start with your own priorities: what topics, insights, or recommendations are you most motivated to share with readers? If you are responding to readers’ requests or completing a school assignment, check in with the formal expectations: what will readers or instructors consider necessary information or arguments to include?

You can also double-check any point in your document where:

- The concept is **abstract** or complicated

- The issue you address is **unresolved** or highly debated among experts in the field
- The information, effects, or proposals you offer are likely to be **unfamiliar** to readers
- Your specific readers are likely to be most **doubtful** about or resistant to your ideas

Rather than quickly tapping out a public internet search on your phone, you should make a final inquiry plan that considers all your options. As a first step, consider rereading sources or reports you have already located while using your strongest active reading strategies: in your early reading and writing, you may have overlooked a stronger example or an alternate perspective. You should also check the citations and acknowledgments of your current sources, since the data those writers gathered is likely to already be relevant and credible for your readers. And if you need specific information, you may find that new inquiry approaches—such as consulting a specialized database or interviewing a local expert via video—are more effective than replaying your previous searches.

Finally, you may find that a librarian is exceedingly helpful now, when you know how to explain what you're hunting for and what you have already found. And from a librarian's point of view, you are now a dream client: you are knowledgeable, you are motivated, and you are about to present them with a really intriguing puzzle that will catch their professional attention.

Inquire rhetorically

If you discover a basic knowledge gap—you just need *new information*, such as rainfall statistics for the last four local hurricanes—you can use inquiry strategies that you're already familiar with from your early and middle inquiry stages. In other cases, you may have some information but have concerns that it needs more specificity or power in order to accomplish your goals and engage your readers. You may need to approach your question from a different angle or use new resources or methods that help you respond to readers' needs.

Triangulate your support

For your most important arguments or resistant readers, you may need to demonstrate that your explanations and conclusions are supported by several data points, not just one quotation from one source (even if it is a highly credible source). Sometimes you will gain power simply from demonstrating that more than one credible analysis has reached similar conclusions (“Groenthal and Chu's study *also supports* more team-based learning”). In other cases, you may also want use new keywords or approaches to search for evidence that connects to different members of your audience (“Students who were surveyed also say . . .”)

or to combine different kinds of evidence, such as numerical data *and* personal experiences.

Improve your credibility

The sources you trust may not be the same sources that your readers will trust: check each of your key sources of information, and/or your explanation of your methods for gathering primary data, to be sure that they will live up to the expectations of your readers and the discourse community they belong to. For instance, you might need to locate and review an original study rather than a short news report that describes it, or to create a chart with exact data rather than summarizing the results. In other cases, you may need to look for more local or personally relevant examples: readers at a small state college may not consider studies done with students at Stanford or Harvard to be relevant to their art history classes.

Address complexity and feasibility

If you are recommending change, even a small one, you might have been tempted in your first draft to avoid a difficult question or resistance point, such as how much time, money, stress, collaboration among agencies, or rare materials your change will involve. As you complete your final inquiry, you need to consider how a skeptical reader might respond when you ask for action: what data, examples, or reassurances can you provide? You may need additional inquiry to show:

- How changes are possible, step by step
- Why changes are worth the effort or expense that readers will incur
- How changes have been proven to achieve results for people similar to your readers

If you cannot find a single source that answers readers' concerns, you may have to find several sources that you can synthesize later: one that describes the cost for building dunes on the Texas coast, one that demonstrates how dunes reduce flood damage, and even one that quotes a resident about experiencing a storm on a protected coastline.

Consider the *other other side*

In a complicated problem, writers usually find more than “two sides” in response to a proposition. One way to check your own assumptions and engage more readers is to inquire about third and fourth perspectives. In Seaside Heights, aside from the business owners and environmentalists, what other groups might benefit from or resist rebuilding or relocating businesses after the hurricane: taxpayers? unemployed residents? tourists? Are there any middle-ground responses between “everybody rebuilds” and “nobody can rebuild in the flood-prone area”? You don't need to represent the views of every food-truck owner or pharmacist,

but you should consider what “*other other sides*” your readers might be part of or interested in, and seek information to respond to those perspectives and positions.

Explore 21.1



Late-stage inquiry benefits from honest rhetorical reflection. To start this process, summarize your current rhetorical situation: “My main goal with this project is to ____; my readers’ main point of uncertainty or concern is ____.” Then write four more notes: Where exactly does your current evidence *best* support your goal, *least* support your goal, *most completely* respond to readers’ concerns, and *least strongly* respond to those concerns? Be as forthright as possible, especially about your *readers’ main concerns*: if you have a lot of information about the benefits of a solution, but you suspect that readers are more concerned about financial costs, you need to address that issue directly.

Practice



- To practice **identifying complications**, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Believing/Doubting](#), [Evil Genie](#), [Gray-Area Finder](#), [Out on a Limb](#), [Reason Appallingly](#), or [Three Cubes](#).
- To practice **addressing readers’ questions or concerns**, see [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Inner Three-Year-Old](#), [They Say + I Say](#), [Used To Think / Now I Think](#).

Learn



- To learn more about **reading sources actively**, see [Chapter 6](#), [Reading as a Writer](#).
- To learn more about **supporting a recommendation for change**, see [Chapter 18](#), [Developing Projects that Propose Change](#).
- To learn more about **advanced strategies for locating sources**, see [Chapter 19](#), [Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions](#).

21.2 Creating New Knowledge

When you’re writing about a complex problem, you are likely to discover that there is no single, simple answer. Rather than get frustrated that nobody has fixed the issue yet, you should take this as indication that you’re doing important work that readers will value. As an advanced writer, you can go beyond agreeing or disagreeing with arguments that other people have made, and provide your readers with something new, something they cannot easily find on their own or in another accessible document:

- New data gathered through interviews, observations, or experiments
- Fresh insight gained by looking at a problem from your own personal, professional, or community perspective
- Relevant recommendations synthesized by combining ideas from a unique collection of other source material

As you reach the final stages of inquiry, and you've committed to a draft of the project, you are more aware of what your audience most needs or will benefit from, and more aware of what information is available (and what is missing) in the expert conversation around you. You can thus take one more look for opportunities to extend your explanations or arguments into new territory.

Identify opportunities for contributions

As a newcomer to a field, you may struggle with finding confidence that your views will make a valid contribution to a conversation held by so many experts. Yet knowledge is usually created in small steps: If you have been working on a line of inquiry for a while, and you have tracked several possible sources for information, and you have sought assistance from a librarian, and still no clear answer emerges, you may have identified a gap in the commonly available knowledge of the field or conversation.

If there's a gap or debate, what could you contribute?

- **A local connection or personal view:** if you have traveled to San Antonio or taken an art history class, then including your own specific experience not only helps support your reasoning about other data, but contributes information that no other writer has yet brought to the conversation.
- **A localized application or personalized recommendation:** if most of the experts have focused on East Coast hurricanes or on how two-parent families manage vacation time, then you could use your experience of living in communities on the Florida coast or single-parenting to expand the conversation.
- **An updated review and judgment:** if experts in a conversation are still debating about quality, causes, or solutions, you have as much right as anyone to review the evidence, right up to the most recent ideas, and provide your own reasoned judgment about which approach is most beneficial, accurate, or feasible. (The more you address gray areas rather than simply agreeing with one stance, the more you contribute to your readers' improved understanding.)
- **Updated data or new solution:** if you have collected qualitative or quantitative data, that new data will expand readers' knowledge, even if your data mostly reinforces what is already known. Likewise, if you are ready

to synthesize several perspectives to suggest a new procedure, device, or solution—or even a slightly different step or approach that you haven’t seen mentioned—you will contribute to what is known about the issue.

Create new information through synthesis or extrapolation

You don’t always have to bring new data or wildly different opinions to contribute: you may instead build new knowledge by thoughtfully—and perhaps innovatively—combining information from several sources.

Perhaps your university’s art history senior capstone course has sixty students (and the dean you interviewed said that the course size cannot be changed in the near future), yet all the scholarship you’ve read about the new student-centered humanities curriculum focuses on courses of thirty or fewer students. In this case, you may need to draw on scholarship about improving large lecture courses in biology or engineering at other schools, and adapt some of those strategies to create class activities that will be relevant for art history faculty at your school. That kind of synthesis of information from related or complementary fields is a common way of building new knowledge.

Similarly, in order to estimate a plausible budget for building a protective dune at Seaside Heights, you may need to review the costs for a smaller local rehabilitation project ten years ago and extrapolate what a larger project today might cost based on information you can find about materials and the rate of inflation. Alternately, you could report on the actual costs of recent levees in New Orleans as well as a dune modification project off the coast of South Carolina, and reasonably extrapolate from that data to suggest how the Seaside Heights costs might compare.

To contribute knowledge through synthesis or extrapolation, you will need to be creative and persistent about hunting for the baseline data that “adds up” to your new ideas. You will also need to take several sentences (or perhaps a whole paragraph or more) to show how you have built your new information, a step at a time. You may also need to use appropriate hedge language (see below) to indicate to readers that your argument is reasonable but untested.

Explore 21.2

You don’t have to be a nationally recognized expert to create knowledge; you just have to have the patience to look carefully for evidence that few other people have attended to, and the confidence to share your ideas publicly. Nobody but you has lived through the last five years of your life; nobody but you has read the exact same set of sources you’ve just read while thinking about your issue. Experiment with being a knowledge creator: write three or four sentences exploring the idea that “Because I have seen/done/learned/read/experienced ____ and ____, I might have a new perspective to offer on this issue regarding ____.”



Practice

- To practice **inquiring into a new perspective**, see [Cousin Topics](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Evidence Shopping List](#), [Gray-Area Finder](#), [Mind the Gap](#), [Out on a Limb](#), or [Question Ladders](#).
- To practice **synthesizing information to create new knowledge**, see [3D Mind Map](#), [Map the Terrain](#), or [Source Synthesis Grid](#).



Learn

- To learn more about using **synthesis or exploration** strategies to create knowledge, see [Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#).
- To learn more about **seeking data from underrepresented communities**, see [Chapter 19, Early Inquiry: Exploring Research Questions](#).



21.3 Adapting to New or Missing Evidence

Late-stage inquirers are also document revisers. Certainly as you find evidence that helps readers engage with sections of your document that you have already drafted, you will work to integrate that evidence. Remember that while there's no rule about how long a paragraph should be, if you add multiple new examples into a section of your document, you may need to reorganize the structure to help readers stay focused.

On the other hand, if you are not able to locate additional evidence you wanted to include, or if you expand or intensify your focus, you will need to modify your writing. Although you will rarely take such drastic action as deleting a major point, you may limit the scope of what you consider, redirect your efforts to another claim, and/or acknowledge the lack of information.

Adapt your analysis to address incomplete information

You might simply not be able to find some answers. You could just hope that your readers don't notice that you are "out on a limb" with no support. But the better solution is to revise your writing so that your claims match your evidence as closely as possible. You can scale back what you claim or recommend, or you acknowledge the problem by directly identifying the gap as an indication that others need to work on.

The strategies below may help you to adapt your document to match the best inquiry process you have been able to sustain.

Hedge

If you discover that in at least one part of your project, you do not have the support to fully justify a claim or argument, you can inch backwards from your claim using a hedge phrase here or there. A hedge phrase turns an absolute claim such as *A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from economic destruction by hurricanes* into a more limited claim:

- A new sand dune *is likely* to protect Seaside Heights . . .
- A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from *some of the* economic destruction . . .
- A new sand dune will protect Seaside Heights from the economic destruction *of most* hurricanes.

You can use hedge words that reduce quantity or completion (going from “all” to *most, many, a majority of, several, some, a few, or selected*, among others). You can hedge the intensity or duration of a claim (from “absolutely” to *maybe, partly, mainly, generally, usually, overall, frequently* or *often*, among others). And you can hedge the certainty of a claim (from “definitely” to *likely, perhaps, apparently, presumably, reasonably, somewhat, or possibly*, among others).

If you use too many hedge phrases, of course, you can start to sound indecisive or timid: readers do expect you to know *something* definite, otherwise why would they read your document? However, advanced writers often use hedge phrases to signal that they understand how complicated a situation is.

Stage

If you discover that you don’t have sufficient evidence to persuade your readers of a major claim or recommendation, then you may decide to focus on stages or sections of your issue. What could you highlight as a first step, as a top priority, or as a most interesting piece of the puzzle? Perhaps your article about art history curriculum could *mention* strategies for lectures, new technologies, and assignments, but you could put most of your focus on collaborative learning in and out of class as a productive first stage for instructors to concentrate on.

Acknowledge or concede

Some inquiries simply do not lead to clear answers: the data conflict, the experts are divided, the local information is incomplete, or the problem turns out to have deeper roots than anyone predicted. Rather than trying to make the situation look simpler or clearer than it is, you may have to create an argument based on complications. You can state outright where you anticipate difficulty, or you may have to concede a point: “While a few large city parks are accessible via a reasonable taxi ride, families who want a true sense of the natural world of south Texas will need to rent a car and be prepared to spend a full day headed out of town.” In

many fields, writers *both* make a clear (if limited) recommendation *and* acknowledge the additional research that still needs to be done on a complex issue.

Adapt your thesis to reflect new understandings

Inquiry-based writing projects are not like puzzles where you snap in the final missing piece that fits perfectly and walk away. They are more like large hanging mobiles: if you add or remove one object, you change the balance of the whole interconnected piece, which may leave it askew or wobbly. As you locate additional information, you may need to adapt your larger claims, address audience resistances, or even modify your thesis or overall conclusions.

If you discover new evidence or an opportunity to contribute knowledge more directly, you can extend or extrapolate your claims: maybe you discover that only two San Antonio sites meet both your original goals of being outdoors, river-based, and family friendly, as well as your new goal of being accessible to children with disabilities—and you add a recommendation that visitors should lobby for better access at other venues. Or perhaps you discover that you cannot support a major claim credibly enough to satisfy your readers: In a true inquiry mode, writers continue to evaluate what we can reasonably present to readers right up to the moment we send a document out.

There are no exact rules for how or where you state your overall argument; you may have a simple or complex statement, one that is highly argumentative or primarily descriptive. As you adapt your document during final inquiry, however, you might check whether you have met the following criteria especially in your introductory and concluding sections.

- Your writing should **accurately address the key points** of your document. In the process of composing, you may have moved away from your initial question or hypothesis a bit; you may also have come to more interesting conclusions or narrowed the scope of your recommendations. Your framing arguments need to reflect those adjustments.
- Your writing should **identify what you want from your readers** (your “so what?”). Since there was a puzzle or problem that prompted the inquiry, you probably want readers engaged in using the answers or solutions, not just admiring your information. If you have modified your recommendations near the middle or end of your document, be sure that you have adjusted your framing statements to match.
- Your writing should **acknowledge key complications**. In many situations, writers gain credibility by acknowledging directly that we know our report may be controversial or our plan difficult to implement. If your inquiry has helped you see how many more factors are involved with your issue than you first thought, you will help your readers by

revealing those interactions directly in the opening and concluding sections of your project.

- Your statement should **identify your new contributions**. Perhaps you have selected information that is most relevant to your readers' specific context; perhaps your data provides a new context for previous studies; perhaps you have new insights or recommendations to offer on a performance, theory, event, or problem. Diverse, impatient readers may benefit from you indicating exactly what you add to their understanding.

Explore 21.3



Choose either your introductory paragraph(s) or your concluding paragraph(s) to practice some revisions on. Change at least three sentences so that the paragraph more accurately previews or acknowledges your current position: use hedge words, focus on a single stage, acknowledge limitations or complications, or add more specific and accurate indicators of your goals or findings. Remember that you don't need to cram all of your complex thinking into a sentence or two: take the time you need to walk your readers up to and out from your key points.

Practice



- To practice **adapting your focus or argument**, see [Audience Switch](#), [Boil Down](#), or [Stance Switch](#).
- To practice **revising your document** to match your knowledge and goals, see [Add/Move/Change/Delete](#), [Conclusion Transplant](#), [Expand and Narrow](#), [Lowest Common Denominator](#), [Shrunken Draft](#), or [Ten Directed Revisions](#).

Learn



- See Chapter 7, [Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#) to learn more about
 - [Revising a thesis statement](#)
 - [Adapting your organizational patterns](#)
 - [Writing rhetorically effective introductions and conclusions](#)
- To learn more about late-stage revision strategies, see [Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection](#).