

Chapter 24. Exercises for Identifying Writers' Goals

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We can think about “exercises” two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn’t happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we’re stuck, we don’t have “writer’s block”—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can



help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- Defining a problem,
- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

Avoid high expectations

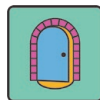
Practice may “make perfect,” but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the “right” answers. Just keep writing answers.

Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

24.1 Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List



Define your goal

Use this exercise to discover what writing topics or problems you are already connected to.

Take action

Option: You can use this exercise as a completely open-ended idea-generator, or you can generate the three lists below *in relation to a specific course subject area, assigned essay topic, or team project focus*, if you already know your writing will be constrained to a more limited set of topics.

Authority: Begin by generating a list of at least 10-15 issues, concepts, people, places, hobbies, foods, movies, skills, or obscure art movements that you think you know more about than the average person does. You might, in fact, be an expert about these areas, or you might just have some insider knowledge or practical experience that not everyone does. Try to list a few things that you think people in your class, workplace, or community would be surprised to find out that you know or care about.

Curiosity: Then generate a list of at least 8-10 issues, concepts, people, places, problems, causes, procedures, historical events, technologies, careers, or human behaviors that you find puzzling or would like to know more about. Try asking some “why?” or “how?” questions. You should feel free to include small curiosities (“how do they get toothpaste into the tube?”) if you really have spent time wondering about them, as well as larger puzzles; try to list a few unexpected curiosities that you think not many people spend time wondering about.

Annoyance: Finally, generate a list of at least 8-10 issues, concepts, people, events, policies, behaviors, conflicts, products, movies, games, or habits that bother, irritate, or deeply frustrate or anger you. Try to include some items that you think are important to only a small or local group of people as well as some that aggravate or provoke thousands more, and to include some annoyances that you think few people in your peer group have recently noticed as a problem.

Reflect to learn and connect

When you have a robust list, go back and star or circle one “obvious” and one “obscure” item in each list, to help remind you of ways you can immediately connect with or immediately be surprising to an audience simply by choosing to write about a conversation you already find resonant.

Explore related exercises

[Off on a Rant](#), [Six Degrees](#), [Subtopic Generator](#)

24.2 Backtalk

Define your goal

Use this exercise to turn negative energy into productive energy for a writing project.

Background

If you find yourself assigned to write about a book, question, issue, or field that you don't care about—or even better, that you actively *dislike*—you can often use



that response to generate some powerful writing.

Take action

Write for 10-15 minutes as honestly and specifically as possible about what you don't like and why you don't like it: you might frame this as a letter to an instructor, to the chair of a department, to a specialist in the field or an author/creator, or to an editor of a journal who had just run a whole special issue on this topic. Identify as many *specific examples* as possible about the text or issue that seem vague, simple, irrelevant, confusing, overrated, unsupported, contradictory, or just uninteresting. You might also point out elements in your personal or professional context that make this issue/text a bad match for you right now: how does your background, education, or professional focus pull you away from the assigned text or topic?

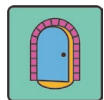
Reflect to learn and connect

What if it's *not just you*? If one person trips on a sidewalk, it might just be clumsiness, but if a dozen people do in one morning, maybe there is a problem with the sidewalk. Write for 5 more minutes to generate some additional statements that begin, "Maybe there's a problem with . . ." If you're not sure whether these ideas are still within the assignment boundaries, check with your instructor before following through on them.

Explore related exercises

Dialogue, Gray-Area Finder, Off on a Rant

24.3 Lowest Common Denominator



Define your goal

Use this exercise to generate opening paragraphs that connect with a target audience.

Background

In math, the lowest common denominator is the simplest way to convert unlike fractions so that you can work with them in a single equation. In writing, you can think of the lowest common denominator as the closest place where both you and your target audience have a common interest and can begin a conversation with equal enthusiasm. The LCD varies with audience: a project about new accounting procedures that's written for accountants can link to readers at the start by referring to a specific part of the new rule; a project on the same issue written for small business owners might start by mentioning the challenge of meeting

business regulations; that project written for congressional aides might begin by reminding them of similar legislation about health-care procedures.

Take action

Identify the overlaps: Note your main goal and your target audience at the top of your page. Begin by freewriting—or start a list in the first column of a three-column chart—about your readers' possible relationships to your issue: what do they already know and believe about it? what experiences have they had that relate to it? what questions are they likely to have about it? what effects does it or might it soon have on their personal or professional lives? what would startle or concern them most about it?

Connect the facts: Continue writing—or start your second column—by listing specific, memorable facts, examples, quotations, or conundrums that you know or have learned about your issue that parallel the questions and connections you were just writing about. Try to choose and even “convert” your knowledge to your readers' terms as precisely as possible: some readers will want to know precisely about “last-in-first-out” reporting standards, while others will be more interested in overall efficiency of reporting using some numerical data, and some in the concept of international government mandates about reporting with no fancy terms or data.

Link the emotions: Next, considering that you are beginning a relationship and thus must consider the emotional qualities of it (or lack thereof), add some notes—or complete your third column—about how different connections would provoke readers to feel. Which connections would spark hope, excitement, curiosity? Which connections would spark concern, fear, frustration? Which connections would set a more neutral, professional tone? Add some notes: what are the benefits of having your readers begin in one mood over another?

Write the LCD: When you have several good options, try out one or two sample LCD sentences. You can write them informally to get a feel for the connection (“Hi, Reader, since you're interested in ____, you might be interested to know that ____”) or try out a more formal approach that could begin a document (“Given the current problems with ____, concern is growing about the need for better standards in ____”).

Reflect to learn and connect

Which part of this exercise was most helpful? Write your future self a note: “Next time you get stuck working on the start of a document, remember to try ____.”

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Conclusion Transplant, Six Structures

24.4 Magic Three Choices



Define your goal

Use this exercise to improve your decision-making ability in a difficult, “blocked,” or high-stakes situation.

Background

Researchers who study scientists, managers, politicians, and other “deciders” have demonstrated that human beings make more rational, more successful decisions when we are *choosing from at least three fully viable options*.

When someone’s choice is “this or nothing,” the person tends to choose “this,” because “nothing” seems scary. When someone’s choice is between “this” and “that,” the person is biased to choose what is most familiar, which often leads to repeating past mistakes. But when someone’s choice is among three completely viable options (not “chocolate cake” vs. “mud pie” vs. “stale oatmeal”), that person’s critical thinking fully engages and their decision is more likely to produce a successful outcome. You may give yourself more than three choices, but *three* is both a proven minimum for success and a number that often has a kind of magical feel to it (think of how many fantasy stories involve three wishes, three chances, or three doors), so choosing among three options can feel very satisfying.

Take action

Try it small: Design three sentences, such as three versions of a sentence stating your main argument, or three versions of the very first sentence for your document. Begin by writing out your very best version of the sentence so far. Read it again so you know what it says.

Then scroll down the page or open a new file so you don’t see the first version, take a breath, and try a second version. Do something intentionally different to this one: include more information about causes or consequences, address the reader more directly or use a more formal voice, take a firmer stance or provide more options, include more details (make them up if you have to) or be more straightforward. Reread that sentence, and improve it some: make it a completely viable sentence in itself, one that fits your goals and fits the project.

Finally, scroll down or open a third file, and try a third sentence. Again, try to do something different: maybe this time, try writing a sentence you might not normally write, one that goes out on a limb or aims to shake the reader up a bit, one that’s longer or shorter than your usual style, one with a quotation or a prediction (make them up if you need to), one that shows more humor, wordplay, or expert diction than you often use. Reread and revise that sentence, too, so that you believe it is viable and competent.

Make a choice: Now go back and look at all three sentences, and write yourself a short Decision Recommendation Paragraph. (If you have the option to get feedback from a peer, this is a good time to do so.) What do you see as the advantages or strengths of each sentence, given your goals and your audience's needs in this project? What do you see as the drawbacks or weaknesses of each sentence? Based on this analysis, what advice do you give yourself: choose one sentence? work on a fourth sentence that combines elements from some of the others, or that takes another approach entirely? why? It's fine if you still prefer the first sentence (as long as your other sentences weren't "mud pie" sentences): now you know you are making an informed choice, not just settling for the first words out of your head.

Try it larger. You can also use this process for other decisions. Creating the options to make some other choices may take a little longer, but research has demonstrated that you can save yourself time by choosing well at the start of a process rather than sinking lots of time into an unworkable approach. Remember that your options don't have to be perfect, but each one should be significantly, intentionally using a different approach (try opening a separate file for each one) and you should make each one an entirely viable option, if perhaps a risk-taking or innovative move.

- Write three project proposals, emphasizing different interests or angles
- Create three separate outlines, or parts of outlines, for your project
- Write three versions of your interview questions
- Write three versions of a tricky synthesis paragraph, using different sources and/or including more or less information
- Write three drafts of a concluding paragraph
- Do three layout sketches for a poster or slide
- Write three revision plans or refocusing paragraphs to guide your work

Make a choice: Remember to go back and look at all three options, and write yourself a short Decision Recommendation Paragraph. What do you see as the advantages or strengths of each one, given your goals and your audience's needs in this project? Based on this analysis, what advice do you give yourself: choose one sentence? work on a fourth sentence that combines elements from some of the others, or that takes another approach entirely? why?

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note about how you can apply this strategy elsewhere in your document or your current writing projects: what's at least one more place that you need to make similar careful decisions?

Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Ten Directed Revisions, Used to Think/Now I Think

24.5 Not-talk



Define your goal

Use this exercise to use what you know about familiar writing tasks to help plan your strategies for an unfamiliar one.

Background

Researchers have found that people often teach themselves new skills by identifying *what not to do* based on previous experience with other activities. A ballet dancer learning hip-hop has to learn *not* to straighten their legs every time they stand up; a newly promoted manager may have to remember they are *not* the team leader who is expected to speak first in their new job. Advanced writers often understand new tasks or genres by identifying how they are *not like* other tasks or genres they have written in before. Because “not-talk” is often informal and exploratory, you may feel more comfortable using a spoken rather than written approach: you can interview a friend and take notes on one another’s ideas, or you can dictate a note into your phone or tablet. Alternately, you can write out your ideas in an informal list or paragraph.

Take action

Briefly describe the writing task you need to complete now, and then list at least two or three other documents or writing tasks that you have worked on recently that are *not* exactly like this current task. Your “not” tasks can be similar to your current task: for instance, you can compare a book review in an American history class with a literary analysis paper for an English literature class. Your “not” tasks can also be a little or a lot different: you could also compare a movie review, an argumentative analysis for a history class, or a biology lab report.

Explain several ways that one of your “not” tasks is in fact *not* like the task you are currently working on. You might consider obvious details such as the length, layout, diction, or topic, as well as more rhetorical issues such as the audience expectations or your own goals, knowledge problems such as the depth of inquiry you need to conduct, or process challenges having to do with organization, timing, or opportunities for feedback. Try to identify one or two aspects that are *close but not quite the same* as in your current project: where might a less attentive writer barge ahead thinking they could just do the same thing, but you’ve noticed something that could be an important difference between the two? Also try to think about what you usually or always do as a writer in your more familiar tasks that you might not need to do or be able to do in the current one. When you’re done talking about how the first not-task is not like your current task, go to the second one (or switch with your partner).

Review your answers and list three or four of the differences that seem most important and/or most difficult. Write yourself a note about how you might go about creating a new strategy or finding a new resource to bridge one or more of these gaps.

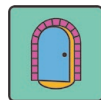
Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some “Yes-talk”: tell or write yourself some notes about what you *can* carry over from one or more previous projects to help you cope with the new project.

Explore related exercises

Genre Switch, Remix/Mashup, Stance Switch

24.6 Old Wine, New Bottles



Define your goal

Use this exercise to explore pathways for generating an argument or analysis that doesn't only repeat what you've been told (by an instructor or by other reports or analyses).

Background

Consider a relevant scenario: Your American History 101 class of 150 people has been assigned to write about whether Alexis de Tocqueville's writings prefigured modern concepts of US identity, and you want to stand out from the other students. Or you're assigned to write an argument about web-based vs. device-based applications, and you agree 100% one source you found supporting device-based, but you don't want to just repeat it. Or you want to propose cheaper parking on campus, but the student newspaper editor says he's heard it all before and won't publish a tired old argument. Or you want to start a blog about being a new mom—just like every other new mom does. How can you make yourself heard as a new voice in the crowd?

Take action

Sketch out ideas using two or three of the following strategies: make notes about the argument and the support you could use in your project.

- **Personalize it:** Brainstorm all the ways that your specific situation and identity—your age, gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, geographical location, job, family or medical history, hobbies, travel experiences, friendships, and pet peeves—connect you to or disconnect you from this issue. Not all audiences will be receptive to a first-person narrative, but

even without saying “One day last week I . . .,” you can focus at least part of your attention on the exact element that most applies to your situation—and then frame it as crucial for *many* readers to attend to.

- **Get an angle:** Consider the issue as linked to various locations, to different communities or subgroups of people affected by it, as it might be or have been viewed at different times in history; look far back to see all the causes that led to it or far out to see all the effects it might generate; consider the biggest and the smallest pictures (an eon, a day, a person, a cell);
- **Synthesize it:** Synthesis is “bringing together,” and the more dissimilar the objects, fields, or ideas you bring together, the newer the resulting concept. What field do you already know about that other readers won’t expect to see combined with de Tocqueville (stagecraft), smartphone apps (tutoring rural school kids), or motherhood (your training as a systems engineer), that you could use to synthesize an idea that is “bigger than the sum of its parts”? What cousin topic fields could you investigate to find an outlier source to help synthesize cross-disciplinary or alternate-perspective ideas? Weaving ideas together in a new way, even if none of them is your brand new idea, is still a new contribution on your part.
- **Inch out on a limb:** If you can take your whole point out on a limb, great. If not, you can use proposals, suggestions, or hypotheticals to inch your way out. Even data-based researchers often use a final paragraph to suggest what additional questions remain unanswered and should be investigated in future studies; other writers can use hypothetical examples (“Suppose for the sake of argument that we built a fourth parking garage”) or describe proposals that are acknowledged to be beyond current resources (“What if all US parents had a year’s paid leave?”) that create room to engage readers in new, carefully structured thinking.
- **Add a bright feather:** Sometimes an old hat perks up when you add one bright new feather. Can you include a vivid framing story that updates the situation for current readers? Add one new idea to resonate with your situation, place, or community? Provide a little new data from an interview with the buildings and grounds supervisor or survey of evening-class students about their current parking habits?
- **Re-mediate it:** Not all rhetorical situations are open to multimedia or alternate genre documents—but you might find it worthwhile to ask about your options for working with pictures or graphs, short audio or video recordings, audience-interaction elements, or other design features, for sections or the entirety of your project. Remember that content should change as form and media options change: the new media and design may improve the wine as well as the bottle.

Be careful that your newly bottled argument still meets your goals and, if

necessary, is appropriate for your assignment, in terms of demonstrating ways of thinking and addressing the key issues.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with some notes about what additional inquiry, analysis, and design work you might need in order for your project to live up to your new ideas.

Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Inner Three-Year-Old, Out on a Limb, Seven Generations

24.7 Out on a Limb



Define your goal

Use this exercise to increase the risk-factor, focus, “originality,” intrigue, and/or power of your current claim without overreaching.

Background

In the initial stages of working on an argument or a problem, writers often start with a general concept of the issue, the kind that anyone might have. You might envision someone climbing a tree but staying very close to the trunk: he would be hard to see unless he stepped further “out on a limb.” In order to catch and keep readers’ attention, a writer needs to step away from what everyone already believes—but they should not go so far out on a limb that there is no supporting evidence and the branch breaks under their feet. After you have been thinking about your issue for a while, you can try some approaches for “going out on a limb” a little further.

Take action

Write out or copy your current working thesis sentence(s) on a new page. For each of the steps below, create a new version based on one of the earlier versions, so that you can compare the various versions. When you get to a version that you think has gone beyond what you can reasonably support with credible evidence and reasoning, stop and label it “too far out on a limb.”

Intensify: Like adding a little salt and then a little more, add intensifying words or phrases to make the condition seem more dire, the solution more effective, the insight more revealing, or the analysis more encompassing.

- The nursing school application exam fee is too high.
- The nursing school application exam fee is unfairly high.
- The high nursing school application exam fee discriminates against low-income students.

- The high nursing school application exam fee was designed by the federal government to keep poor urban students out of the profession. (*Too far out on a limb!*)

Specify: Like increasing the power of a microscope lens, add narrowing words or phrases to limit the scope of the problem to a location, a group, a time period, or a set of circumstances, or to propose a single step, approach, or theory in response, in order to investigate an angle not everyone has paid attention to yet.

- New democratic governments in northern Africa face challenges.
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process.
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation.
- Egypt faces difficulty keeping all parties involved in its new governing process, and should immediately adopt the German system of proportional representation which will solve that problem. (*Too far out on a limb!*)

Qualify: In some situations, you may have an audience that will tolerate a suggestion which you cannot entirely prove, as long as you don't get too wild or too wishy-washy. Qualifying words or constructions will let you indicate that you want your audience to join you out on a limb and to think beyond the demonstrable facts: *may, might, could, possibly, perhaps, somewhat, some, a few, often, many, commonly.*

- The high nursing school application exam fee discriminates against low-income students, *possibly* lowering the number of Latinx Americans entering the profession. (Reasonably qualified)
- The *somewhat* high nursing school application exam fee *perhaps* discriminates against *some* low-income students, *possibly* lowering the number of Latinx Americans who *might* enter the profession. (Too wishy-washy!)
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation, or they *may* risk returning to dictatorships or anarchy. (Reasonably qualified)
- New democratic governments in northern Africa face difficulty keeping all parties involved in the process, and should focus on developing a system of proportional representation, *possibly even* imposing martial law to ensure all parties are included on voting day. (*Too wildly counterproductive!*)

Reflect to learn and connect

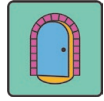
Conclude by writing yourself a few notes. What additional inquiry or analysis

will you need to do to provide convincing support for your new claim? Where else in your document will you need to make adjustments to accommodate your new stance and your new relationship with readers?

Explore related exercises

Date My Topic, Evidence Shopping List, Learn-Write Timeline

24.8 Six Degrees



Define your goal

Choose a topic to write about that connects to interests you already have or messages you already want to convey—or identify connections you can make to the topic/issues of a writing project that is out of your control—so that you have more confidence and motivation as a writer.

Background

“Six degrees of separation” is the name of a popular social network theory, a play, a movie, and (as “Six degrees of Kevin Bacon”) a party game from the 1990s. The popular theory is that any two people on the planet are connected, through their friends and friends-of-friends, by no more than six steps. In accordance with this theory, then, you should be able to connect to a wide variety of issues you can write about by taking six or fewer steps outward from topics, events, or ideas that you already care about.

Take action

Step One: Identify several potential interests that you could already “go off on a rant” or “talk all day” about, or that you have successfully written about before. Try to generate at least 10-15 issues along several lines of thinking.

- **General interests:** Create a list of topics about which you are significantly more knowledgeable, curious, or irritated than the average person around you. What do you talk or post online about already?
- **Area interests:** If you know your writing project will connect to your sociology class, your job as a law office clerk, or your internship at a local vet clinic, and you already have interests or experiences in that field, generate a list of topics or questions related to that area that you have been paying attention to recently or that you have been trying to learn more about.
- **Past successes:** Think back to writing tasks you have completed recently that have been relatively successful for you, and write a descriptive list of those projects. Instead of just listing the topics, try also to identify the core approach(es) and stances that make you successful: when you succeed, are

you explaining, arguing, proposing, analyzing evidence or data, or creating new stories?

- **Values and goals:** Create a list of central values you hold about being a good citizen and responsible human (such as “being grateful” or “being dependable”), and/or list some of your immediate or long-term goals related to your school or professional writing situation (to learn about/how to ___, to manage your time, or to get promoted to a leadership role).

Step Two: Write at least three Interest Topics (such as “Star Wars”) at the top of your page. Write your Target Topic (such as “essay on habitats of waterfowl”) at the bottom of your page. Using intermediate topics as stepping stones, create a series of links that helps you see at least one possible relationship between them: What do you particularly like about your Interest Topic? What’s an area of that topic that might lean you toward your Target? (“Rebels win against odds → Requires astounding luck and talent → Is luck a factor for habitat preservation? → ‘lucky ducks’ vs. ducks protected by laws”)

Suggestions for Step Two in a Controlled Situation: If your writing topic has been assigned to you, more or less—everyone in your class must write about the gender roles in *Frankenstein* or the comparative value of two approaches to ensuring food safety, or your manager wants an assessment of a new data processing program—then your goal is to draw connections specifically to that Target Topic.

- **Set up:** Write your Target Topic at the bottom of your page. From the list(s) you wrote in Step One, choose three Interest Topics to write at the top of your page: you might choose one that very strongly motivates you, one that already seems to be leaning toward your Target Topic in some way, and one that looks like a complete outlier with no hope of making a connection, just to challenge your brain.
- **Explore from your interests:** You can work downward to start. You might begin by reaching out very generally from your Interest Topic (ice hockey, for instance), by noting that for you, the most fascinating characteristic of hockey is its teamwork, its physical contact, or its penalty-box rules. Or you could start right away with more specific direction: list one angle of your Interest Topic that might lean toward gender roles in *Frankenstein* (hockey is very combative), toward food safety regulations (there are some rules to prevent injuries in hockey, but not too many), or toward data processing programs (hockey is a very high-speed game).
- **Explore from your assignment:** You can also work upward, generally or with direction toward your Interests: many characters in *Frankenstein* (as in many ice-hockey leagues) are men looking for fame or prominence; one of the food-safety rules you’re looking at (like illegal “checking” in hockey) is hard to detect and enforce; and good data processing programs

(like hockey players) may need to perform equally well at a variety of tasks. Complete as many top-to-bottom pathways as you can.

NOTE: In an extreme case like this one, you might not mention “hockey” anywhere in your final writing project, but if you write about an unfamiliar issue while thinking about its possible parallels to something you are passionate about and familiar with, your writing will likely be easier and stronger.

Suggestions for Step Two in an Exploratory Situation: If your writing topic has some or a lot of flexibility—you can “explain the core features of any discovery in astronomy in the past 50 years” or “recommend one significant change in middle school teacher support and/or evaluation policies” or even “write an argument about an issue that is important to you”—then your goal is to explore several possible connections to determine your best options.

- **Set up:** Write your Exploratory or General Topic at the bottom of your page. From the list(s) you wrote in Step One, choose three Interest Topics to write at the top of your page: you might choose one that very strongly motivates you, one that already seems to be leaning toward your goal in some way, and one that looks like a complete outlier with no hope of making a connection but that could give you good exploratory room and options you hadn't considered before.
- **Explore from your interests:** You can begin by working downward or outward from your Interest Topics. You can reach out generally from a starting point: your interest in gospel music, for instance, could suggest you also have interests in investigating or reporting on religion, culture, American music traditions, history, performance, collaboration, and perhaps elements of your childhood or family experiences, as well as particular artists or musical styles. You might work outward further to consider whether there's a period of history you connect to (the Civil Rights era? earlier history of colonial America or more recent history of cross-cultural immigration?) or kinds of collaborations you admire (two-person partnerships or larger groups/teams?).
- **Explore from your goals:** You can also start to work up from the bottom, or to be more directive in your top-down connections: do you want to look for astronomy discoveries that were made by partners or teams? do you want to examine school policies that encourage teachers to experiment with performative teaching styles that increase classroom engagement, or that support diversity among school faculty? If you have a professional interest in obtaining a leadership position someday, perhaps you want to look for connections to changes being recommended by the local mayor, or to the roles that school principals take in supporting teachers.

When you have many options, create as many possible pathways as you can think of, and “try them on” in your head: which ones make you feel more connected to and engaged by the possibilities for writing?

Step Three: When you have created one or more pathways between your interests and your target Topic, choose a possible pathway and write yourself a short paragraph explaining how “Thinking about X can help me write about Y,” where X is your interest and Y is your assignment. (“Thinking about ice hockey could help me write about food safety because I could focus on the balance between ‘playing the game smoothly’ and ‘keeping everyone safe.’ Also, I could really look at whether all those regulations are necessary, since in hockey we all know that having some risk allows us to create a more innovative, exciting game.”)

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by writing one or two sentences to your future self: What interests, questions, or commitments do you have that seem like they might frequently link to a wide range of topics for future writing?

Explore related exercises

Audience/Stakeholder Mapping, Date My Topic, Six Structures

24.9 Stance Switch



Define your goal

Use this exercise to try out an authorial stance that may give you more insight into your issue, freedom to describe difficult or sensitive aspects of it, or credibility with your readers without losing a connection to your core identity or goals.

Background

You may have noticed that you stand a little taller when you put on a business suit, that you feel more like dancing when you put on a T-shirt, or that other people treat you with respect when you stride confidently into a room even if you’ve never been there before. You’re the same person whatever stance or clothing you adopt, but your external attributes can influence both your behavior and others’ response to your behavior. Similarly, when you adopt a stance and a voice as a writer, those decisions can influence how you think, what you write, and how others respond, so experimenting with your stance can help you tap into ideas you didn’t know you had and gain readers’ respect without sacrificing your integrity as a writer. Your *stance* as a writer involves both your attitude (confident, relaxed, knowledgeable, exploratory, humorous, serious) and your relationship

with your readers (professional, personal, demanding, requesting, authoritative, supportive, engaged, distant, motivating, calming).

Take action

Note three different stances you could take in your current writing project. You can describe them using just words like those listed above, or you can describe mini-scenarios (teacher writing to fourth-grader, lab professor writing to intern, friend writing to friend, activist writing a speech to a crowd). If you'd like stance can be the one you're currently using for your project.

Choose a key moment—either an important point or argument, a paragraph you're currently working on, or a part of the issue you're stuck on—and freewrite for 5-6 minutes from within that stance. Try to really “get into the part”: feel what it's like to have that goal and that relationship; use the language and the authority vested in you; reach out (or hold back) just the way such a writer would. You can even be a bit overdramatic if you want: write like the extra-jargony journal writers you've been reading, or like a hyperactive ten-year-old excited about something for the first time, sketching stick figures in the margins. Write quickly without worrying about getting all the details or facts exactly right: your goal is to get the feel of writing within this stance.

Repeat for the two other stances, writing about the exact same angle of your project, just from an alternate position. When you're done, go back and underline the most powerful or interesting sentence from each stance's writing.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note to yourself: what do these powerful parts have in common that helps you see what lies at the heart of your ideas on this issue? Also note if writing in one of the stances helped you make a connection or break out of a sticky spot: how else might you tap into this strategy or energy for your project, *even if* you still need to present (most of) the final project from a less comfortable stance?

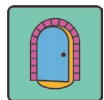
Explore related exercises

Cousin Topics, Diction Flexer, Elevator Speech, Out on a Limb

24.10 Ten Ways to Choose a Topic

Define your goal

Use this exercise to choose a topic for *assigned* writing that connects to issues that interest, motivate, or concern you *personally*.



Take action

Pick an approach, and write your first list. In each of these cases, generating a longer list (closer to 10) will help you dig ideas out of your brain that weren't obvious but that might be intriguing, motivating, or surprisingly relevant.

1. **What I know:** List 5-10 concepts, examples, or experiences that you already know well that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on
2. **Where I stand:** List 5-10 personal beliefs or values, aspects of your identity, family perspectives, or community factors that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on
3. **What stands out:** List 5-10 aspects that are within or related to the general issue you're focused on that you can see vividly in your mind's eye, that everyone is talking about, that have the largest costs or benefits, or that are the most unusual or surprising
4. **What puzzles me:** List 5-10 questions, inconsistencies, contradictions, or recent changes that are related to the general issue you're focused on
5. **What's combinable:** List 5-10 entirely different subjects or events that you know something about that are **different from** but could be **compared, contrasted with, or connected to** the general issue you're focused on in order to reveal a new side of it
6. **What's missing:** List 5-10 factors, groups, causes or effects, costs or benefits, locations or experiences, that are often missing or overlooked when people consider the general issue you're focused on
7. **What's the _____iest:** List 5-10 "extreme" factors in the general issue you're focused on: for instance, you might list some of the best/worst, most/least expensive or effective, earliest/latest, nearest/farthest, easiest/hardest, largest/smallest, fastest/slowest, or clearest/muddiest elements
8. **What's before/next?** Work backward in time for 5-10 steps: what happened just prior to the current state of this issue, and what happened before that, and what happened before that—OR work forward in time for 5-10 steps: if things keep going the way they're going, what might be the next event or result, and the one after that, and the one after that?
9. **What I would command:** List 5-10 changes you would make—if you had enough power and resources—to people, communities, laws, actions, objects, or attitudes related to the general issue you're focused on
10. **Who I reach:** List 5-10 views, questions, or arguments that someone who approached this general issue from an angle different from yours (because of the person's age, identity, affiliations, goals, experiences, or values) might raise

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude with a note to yourself: what kinds of issues, questions, or angles from the lists you wrote here give you the most motivation or confidence for continuing with your writing project?

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Expand and Narrow, Used to Think / Now I Think

24.11 They Say + I Say (Two-Column and Three-Column Logs)

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to move from summary to response as you read another text, and to generate analytical and synthetic knowledge about an issue.

Background

When we read first and then write, it can be tempting simply to repeat what we've read; on the other hand, it can be exciting to simply spout off our own opinions. Summarizing someone else's ideas is easier than generating our own, and generating our own random ideas is easier than combining our ideas—through analysis and synthesis—with what other writers say. Sometimes writers benefit from deliberately separating these modes of writing to make sure we are getting the best combination of ideas.

Take action

Two-column log: Draw a vertical line on paper or create a two-column table in a document.

- In the left column (They Claim), provide a direct quotation from the author's text. It can be something you agree with, disagree with, were surprised by, or have questions about.
- In the right column (I Respond), write a sentence or two explaining your response: what connections, questions, concerns, memories, or emotions does the quotation evoke **for you**, and why? What memories or experiences that **only you** have had in exactly the way you had them does this quotation/idea connect to? and So, What? Try to write sentences that only you could write, about exact documents you have written or wanted to write, or classes you took, or comments you received about writing. Be as vivid as you can.
- As you respond, try not to just agree: Provide a reason, story, or example showing why you agree. **Do not** just translate the sentence ("I think this

means that . . .” or “Here the author is saying . . .”): talk back to it, talk out from it, dig around in your head for a new connection or question.

Two-column log, advanced moves: In your second column, you can try out some advanced thinking. Instead of just giving your first ideas, see if you can disagree with explanation, agree and extend the argument further, agree and add emphasis to a specific element, partially agree but note what’s missing or complicated, or both connect ideas and distinguish them from one another.

Two-column log, four perspectives: In your second column, try out some of each of these four argumentative moves: provide a new *definition* or challenge an accepted definition of a concept; describe a *cause or effect* that the writer has not addressed, explain what’s *good/beneficial* and what’s *bad/destructive* about the author’s idea; or suggest a *solution or a new policy* that could address the author’s idea.

Three-column log: Label your first two columns as above: They Say and I Say. Then choose an option for your third column. You can write about “So, what?” to explore the effects or importance of the idea; you can try to “Extend or Challenge” the idea; you can start a note about how these ideas might work in “My Project.”

Three-column log, synthesis: Create *two* They Say columns, to record parallel or contrasting ideas from two separate sources, then create an “I connect” column or a “Third point of view” column to help you think about how to build up new knowledge that neither of the original authors had considered.

Reflect to learn and connect

Conclude by summing up the two or three most interesting, motivating, or unexpected things from your “I Say” column that could bring energy and depth to your current project.

Explore related exercises

Believing/Doubting, Subtopic Generator, Rate My Source