Chapter 5. Planning a Writing Project

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Determine how much agency you have to shape your writing project
- Choose an appropriate and viable topic or focus for a new writing project
- Identify resources you bring to a writing project and predict difficulties you may face
- Use a DEAL approach to create a plan for your writing project

If you were going to build a new house, visit a new city, or design a new online game, you would start by analyzing and planning. Before you picked up a hammer, jumped in the car, or wrote the first line of code, you would take time to identify key needs, resources, expectations, and constraints.

Writers can certainly start a project—particularly one that is already familiar—by just writing, such as brainstorming an early draft or sketching an outline of key points. Sometimes we gain energy and confidence by moving quickly from a blank page or screen to one that has some of our ideas already laid out.

Before going too far into drafting a project, though, it's useful to invest in more planning. As a reflective writer, especially

one who is working on a project that is new or will require substantial time invested, you will benefit from taking time early in the process to predict the options and set your priorities.

You might spend just a few minutes identifying how your goals align with any instructions you've been given, or you may decide to take time to reflect more extensively about the challenges, resources, and strategies that are most relevant to your project.

As you get started with a new writing task, it may help to 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.

🚪 Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

🚪 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.

Each time you deliberately *reflect to predict* how your writing project will proceed, you gain more knowledge to improve the success of that project, and you improve your ability to transfer writing skills and knowledge to other important tasks you will encounter in the future.

5.1 Reflect to Predict Your Freedom of Choice

Before you take action as a writer, it helps to know where you have the agency to make your own choices, and where you need to meet specific expectations or constraints. In some school assignments, for instance, students receive a clear map of the whole writing task: what questions they should ask, what information they must present, where to locate that information, how they should organize and present ideas, and how they will know when the document is complete. This kind of writing is similar to assembling a piece of prefabricated furniture, running an obstacle course, or using a GPS system to plan a driving route: writers still need to pay attention and adapt, but we follow someone else's plan rather than navigate our own route.

In other situations, writers solve open-ended, "free-range" writing tasks. When we compose love poems or design the website for our new business, we stay aware of readers' needs, but we blaze the trail: we choose the starting and ending points, devise and revise the route, set the priorities for how much information and analysis to share, and decide how to solve challenges and problems we encounter along the way.

A lot of school and professional writing, however, happens in an active navigation zone, where writers are given a destination and some instruction, but also need to select elements of their own route toward successful communication. An instructor, supervisor, or official who requires a piece of writing can have very specific expectations in mind, and yet not always provide turn-by-turn instructions for how to succeed. In that middle zone, you may need to review the instructions carefully to understand the audience's exact needs, the expectations built into the genre, and the complexity of information and analysis in order to be successful; you may also need to examine models of similar documents and "reverse engineer" the strategies of successful communication in a particular genre or scenario.

Explore 5.1

In a few sentences, describe a writing task you encountered recently that was in an active navigation zone: you received some instructions, and you suspected there were some "right answers" or approaches, but you were not sure what exactly was expected. What were you most confident about, and what caused you the most confusion? How did you respond to the challenge, and how did you feel about your writing?

Learn

- To learn more about "free-range" writing tasks, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process.
- To learn more about adapting to your audience, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.

Decode and predict: Analyze formal instructions

Sometimes trying to figure out what is expected in a writing project—and where you have choice or agency—feels like a guessing game with no rules. However, as a reflective writer, you don't need to guess wildly about a project; instead, you can use reflective practice and rhetorical knowledge to carefully "decode" the instructions. That is, you can review what is stated, compare the instructions to key terms and writing principles, and look for clues about what is not directly indicated. Advanced writers can also

- identify the writing moves and scope indicated by the directions
- analyze the key features of any writing sample or similar document
- consider how the rhetorical context influences decisions about genre, modality, and style
- check the instructions against their own knowledge of successful writing strategies

Identify key writing moves

Figuring out what a document should be *about* doesn't usually take much effort, but deciding *how to engage* with that information often takes more reflection. One key prediction that writers benefit from regards how to balance the writing among four kinds of moves that are common in academic and professional writing:

- **Summarizing** known or obvious facts, similarities, processes, or events (this may also include *describing* or *narrating*)
- **Analyzing** the separate parts, moves, or principles that make up a performance, event, or theory (this may also include *classifying* or *comparing*)
- **Arguing** whether one approach, occasion, theory, event, or result is better or more appropriate than another, and supporting that judgment with reasons or evidence
- **Synthesizing** multiple ways of thinking in order to create a new perspective or solution: applying a theory to an example, linking dissimilar events to reveal a pattern, or extrapolating from a known case to a new situation (this may also include *exploring* or *reflecting*)

In this list, the amount of input from the writer increases at each step, from "summarizing" that does not require much original thinking to "synthesizing" that requires substantial insight. A writer who summarizes when they should be arguing (or vice versa) will miss the mark, just as your friend would cause you frustration if you asked for a lunchtime *recommendation* and they provided only a *list* of six nearby restaurants. As you decode the directions to a writing task, then, you should underline or highlight key action words and add your own comments to identify your contributions. Remember that while some simple documents focus on just one of those approaches, many advanced writing tasks require two or more of those purposes.

Here are some common terms to help you start. Note that *italicized terms* may indicate different moves depending on the task or field: for a biology lab, "*define* 'photosynthesis'" might mean summarizing the commonly accepted definition; for a psychology class, "*define* 'mental health'" might mean analyzing multiple components of a psychological state or even arguing about which elements are most important for understanding the concept.

Summarize	Analyze	Argue	Synthesize
Define	Account for	Assess	Apply
Describe	Analyze	Choose	*Argue*
Explain	*Compare/Contrast*	Claim	Cause
Identify	*Define*	Critique	*Compare/Contrast*
List	Develop	Defend	Connect
Review	*Discuss*	*Define*	Create
Report	Examine	*Discuss*	Integrate
Show	*Explain*	Evaluate	Propose
State	*Interpret*	*Interpret*	Relate
	Pros and cons	Judge	Speculate
	Show	*Pros and cons*	Synthesize
		Respond	
		Review	
		Suggest	
		Think	

Explore the focus and boundaries of a task

A second decision that writers make is about the scope of their document: what is crucial or most important to include, and how much depth or detail will be needed. You can use your decoding process to help you rationally predict some boundaries for your document based on clues in the instructions, so you don't leave out key information or get sidetracked by unrelated details.

- **Include all the necessary parts**. You should note words or phrases that identify separate parts or steps of an assignment. These may be number or ordering words (*three* reasons, a *second* step, *a couple* of examples), or they may be less precise phrases that require you to decide (*important* causes, *researched* sources). Remember that some parts might be assumed: a college essay should probably have an introduction, and a memo should probably have an action item, even if those steps aren't stated. Once you have a list, keep it nearby as you write so you don't forget a key element.

- **Leave out unnecessary information**. Determining what is "necessary" and "unnecessary" is not a simple choice in advanced writing: "How much is enough?" is a fundamental question all writers encounter. But you can look at directions and predict some plausible boundaries in advance: Do you need to discuss *all* causes or sub-topics, or can you focus on just a few? What phrases in the directions give you permission to limit your breadth or depth? Finally, remember that in most documents, you're selecting the *most relevant* or *most important* items to consider; these won't always be

the first items you think of, so you may have to revise your idea of "necessary" and "less necessary" as you work on the project.

- **Choose at least one place to go deep**. Most writing tasks are assigned in order to provide a way to record in-depth details and careful thinking; otherwise, we could just speak or text a few sentences to give someone an overview. You should note down at least one part of the task that you can predict will be important to the audience or will line up with an area you know well, and remind yourself to find extra examples, evidence, or analysis to help you show your advanced thinking. If the step-by-step instructions don't define an emphasis ("Analyzing a dance performance *depends on seeing how sound and choreography interact*"), consider issues or questions that have been part of recent conversations or inquiries in your local context.

- **Look for hidden opportunities to contribute insight**. Unless you are told directly not to include your own analysis or proposals—or you know that the genre, such as a budget report, is not a good place for improvisation—you might reasonably predict that as an advanced writer you will be expected to provide your suggestions, insights, and arguments. Often these moves are most appropriate in concluding sections of a document, and are indicated by words from the "Argue" and "Synthesize" categories above. Even if the directions don't specify this work, you might still give yourself permission to *evaluate, suggest, connect*, or *propose* as you compose your document, so you don't miss this opportunity.

- **Identify appropriate sources of information**. All writers research—but not all writing projects require systematic review of credible secondary sources. In some cases, you will receive direct instructions about using your own knowledge or selecting secondary sources; in others, you won't have specific direction but you can predict that in order to support an argument or insight for skeptical readers, you will benefit from learning more and crediting your external sources.

When you highlight the obvious elements to include, and decode the language of the instructions so you can predict some of the less-obvious factors to consider, you give yourself a strong navigation plan that helps you share your best thinking with your readers.

Explore 5.2

Choose one of the sample assignment prompts below to analyze: assume each is for a document about 500-1000 words long. Select at least three terms or phrases that help you predict the work of this assignment: one (or more) that helps identify the expected move(s); one that helps identify the scope; and one that indicates an expectation of critical thinking or insight by the writer. Briefly explain what you think word or phrase means the writer should do.

Sample A: "Select one of the topic ideas below, and discuss the idea of diversity in relation to that topic. Be sure to address several of the multiple identities to which we each belong, which may include race, religion, gender identity, sex, orientation, age, class/socioeconomic status, and ability/disability. You should have a thesis statement that gives your claim, and use at least five different sources to support your point."

Sample B: "Based on our class readings, analyze the complex effects of climate change on one aspect of life here in Oregon (such as agriculture, cities, recreation, public health, or wildlife). First, review the most common physical changes and their consequences; then explain at least two recent legal or political decisions that are relevant. Finally, explain how these forces (environmental, political, and cultural) connect to produce challenges and opportunities for conservation in our state."

Sample C: "Your lab report should have three sections. Your Introduction should state the purpose and procedure of the experiment. The Results and Discussion section should show all the data you collected, discuss any significant problems you encountered, and explain any uncertainties that remain. Be sure to include and discuss relevant calculations, graphs, and charts. Your Conclusion should evaluate your results: was there any disagreement between theory and experiment, and if so, what could you suggest to improve the experiment?"

Learn

- To learn more about **writing moves**, see Chapter 14, Selecting and Combining Composing Moves.
- To learn more about **"how much information is enough?**," see Chapter 15, Developing Projects That Explain.

Decode and predict: Analyze a model document

Some of the most important expectations you may need to decode in an assigned writing task are related to the genre of the document. Experts in a field may be so familiar with typical documents—essays, reports, reviews, and proposals—that they assume everyone knows how to write those documents well. But since writing patterns vary not just between different genres (a novel rarely rhymes) but within genres (not all poems rhyme, either), writers need to be able to locate and decode the key features of relevant, local documents. Does your document need a title and introduction? Should your document cite external sources? Will readers expect the use of field-specific language, or do they hope for straightforward, jargon-free sentences?

A formulaic direction such as "Write 500-800 words" is easy to spot, but genres are dynamic and evolving, so other characteristics may not be that obvious. If possible, you should try to locate a model document similar to the one you need

to write, and take some time to analyze its defining features. If you don't have access to a sample document from a previous assignment or event in your course or workplace, you can consider asking a friend or looking online. Your goal is not to replicate the model, simply substituting your words in here and there; indeed, one reason that instructors sometimes don't provide models is that they're concerned that writers will feel constrained to write a perfect copy rather than use their navigation skills to adapt to the important moves of the document. Instead, you should look for dominant patterns: What kind of information is included? Where is it located? How is it mostly presented?
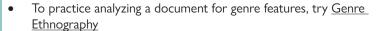
If the genre or workplace setting is new to you, or if the document is high stakes, you may want to complete a full genre ethnography so that you gain a full understanding of what people in your field or situation expect the document to do. If you're in a more familiar situation, you might write yourself some notes about key features like those in the following list—or ask an instructor or co-worker to give you some advice:

- How is this document generally *organized*: what kinds of sections, order, or arrangements does it display? Are sections broken out or woven together?
- What information or approaches generally occur in *key sections* of the document: the beginning, the ending, the central points or examples?
- Are the *sentences* in this document long or short, with formal or informal language, featuring long descriptions or mostly basic facts?
- Is the document designed for slow, careful reading of *in-depth analysis*, or will readers likely skim it quickly for main ideas?
- What format or *design* is used—is there need for any special layout or visual communication?

When you increase your familiarity with the document genre as well as the specific assignment, you will be able to make better predictions about how to structure, support, and present your ideas.

Explore 5.3

Take a look at some writing assignment instructions you received recently, and use your knowledge of genre patterns and fundamental features to decode some key expectations. Begin by listing 1-2 fundamental questions that the instructions answer (or start to answer): "Since the instructions say ____, I know/predict that _____." Then list 2-3 features or approaches that are not directly addressed, and add a note: can you decode the likely expectation on your own, should you locate a model document, or will you need to ask for additional help?

Practice

- To practice analyzing a document for genre features, try <u>Genre Ethnography</u>

- To practice **comparing genres**, try <u>Genre Triple Log</u>.

   NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Learn

- To learn more about **genres**, see <u>Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres</u>.

- To learn more about **designing** a document, see <u>Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities</u>.

- To learn more about **organization patterns**, see <u>Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft</u>.

5.2 Reflect to Choose Your Topic or Focus

Although you may think of writing assignments as inseparable from the fraught question "What should I write about?" it turns out that "choosing a topic" *after* deciding that writing needs to happen is not a typical approach to writing in the world at large. It's true that occasionally, professional or creative writers truly have a blank page and a limitless choice: they could write about tacos, term limits, or Tehran's history, with equal joy and success. But mostly, writers outside of school almost never "choose topics" as an entirely separate stage of their writing process.

Most often, *topics choose writers.* That is, writers discover that we need to communicate something, and then we write what we actually need or feel compelled to say at that moment:

> u wont blv who i saw
> @the game it was
> marie cheering 4
> the OTHER team!!!!

> Dear Principal Brown,

> My child got punched again on the playground today and I
> need to know what the school is doing to solve this problem.

```
To:    A. Muhammed <amuham1@abcd-inc.com>

From: D. Markovitch <dmarkov@abcd-inc.com>

Subject:   Project Report 1

This week our team met three of our four
benchmarks, as outlined below. We require
additional funding to complete the next
stage.
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In each of these cases, the writer is moved by a combination of internal goals and external events, and responds with written communication. Writers might be motivated by a disconnect between what should have happened and what did happen (Marie's questionable sports loyalties); we might see an action or belief that needs correcting (a school's anti-bullying policies); we might need approval or resources to engage in important tasks (a project manager needing resources to support a team). Even novelists and lyricists often say that they woke up one morning thinking about a particular story that they *needed* or wanted to tell—they still benefit from reflecting and predicting about how best to craft that story, but the general topic is not a mystery.

Understand school writing topics

The school-based exercise in "choosing a topic" occurs because a particular kind of writer (a student) is required to demonstrate to a particular kind of reader (an instructor) that they have learned a way of thinking about a particular issue, problem, project, or idea. Indeed, writing is often the best way that students can practice and demonstrate a way of thinking, rather than just showing that they have memorized facts or guessed at some answers.

> A history instructor wants to know that students can *think like historians* in studying the conflicts in western Africa: they want to know that students understand how "history" is composed of multiple stories that have to be sorted and evaluated, contextualized and interpreted, compared and connected.

> An environmental science instructor wants to know that students can *think across disciplines* in assessing lead paint contamination in city houses: they want to know that students will pose hypotheses and examine physical evidence as biologists do, and that students will observe people and assess behavioral patterns as sociologists do.

When you are writing to demonstrate your learning, sometimes there is not much room to "choose a topic": there is only room to follow the directions, with

some minor adaptations in focus and scope, because teachers want all students to experience and represent a very specific kind of learning.

> **Women's studies**: Analyze the problem of gender in *Ourika* and *A Doll's House*. Be sure to consider other factors such as social class, historical setting, and family socialization.

> **Philosophy**: Explain and critically discuss St. Thomas Aquinas' "first cause" argument for the existence of God. Which elements of his argument are most successful at demonstrating the existence of God within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition?

> **Computer science**: Compare the advantages of web-based vs. device-based office productivity applications given the constraints of current popular portable devices (phones and tablets). Recommend a software development approach to a new application developer.

But in some school writing, instructors leave more room to "choose a topic." They hope that by giving you a little room to choose, they are bringing you closer to an outside-school situation in which a topic chooses you—and that as a result, you will find either an emotional or a professional connection to the writing task that will engage and motivate you. But you will only receive this benefit if you take time to reflect and predict how you can align your interests with the school assignment. It is worth your time to slow down and consider your options before you commit your resources, for two reasons.

> First, nearly all the other writing problems you encounter will stem from the foundation you set out at the beginning, just as a house grows from a stable or unstable base. If you choose and focus your initial topic well, you will have far fewer problems to solve later.

> Second, nearly all the writing problems you encounter will be easier to solve if you have some internal motivation connecting you to your writing project. If you choose and focus your initial topic well, you will have more energy to solve the problems that do arise later.

After you choose—or "choose"—a topic, you will still have to solve other problems related to the *moves* and *scope* of your writing project. But least you will be starting out your writing project on solid footing, and you can predict the rest of your writing project opportunities *as if* they were naturally occurring in a rhetorical ecosystem regarding a writing project that chose *you*.

Explore 5.4

Think back to some writing assignments recently where you got to "choose a topic." In a sentence or two, describe one success story: what topic did you choose, and how did you connect to that topic in ways that improved your writing? Then write a sentence or two about a less successful choice: what did you choose, what challenges did you run into as a writer, and looking back now, how do you think you might have made a better choice?

Learn

- To learn more about how **disciplines** affect writers, see <u>Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres</u>.
- To learn more about how **dispositions** like motivation and confidence affect writers, see <u>Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits</u>.

Practice with three sample assignments

To practice reflecting to choose a topic that aligns with your internal or external goals, consider the following three school assignments.

Sample Assignment 1: Communications

Choose a film or a fictional or biographical book that involves extensive interpersonal relationships. Briefly summarize recent research on communication styles in a particular type of relationship model we have studied (such as cross-cultural relationships), and then analyze how a character or set of characters in the film/book use successful or unsuccessful communication strategies as they negotiate that type of relationship. (3-5 pages)

Sample Assignment 2: Chemistry

Chemicals are often seen by the general public in a very negative light. "Contains no chemicals," for example, is a fairly common advertising statement meant to enhance a product's appeal.

Choose one specific area in which chemicals are implicated in a negative sense—the concerns about arsenic in rice, for instance. Analyze the problem with reference to the following questions: Is the problem real? If so, what are possible and practical solutions or alternatives? If not, what is the basis for the poor image of chemicals in this instance and how can that be overcome? Support any assertions of fact through appropriate citations to research in the field. (5-7 pages)

Sample Assignment 3: Composition

Identify a problem that currently affects your neighborhood or community and propose a reasonable solution or beneficial response to it. You should pay particular attention, as we have all semester, to the tension between individual rights/responsibilities and community rights/responsibilities: does the problem arise from too much or too little individual freedom? will the solution be best enacted through individual actions or through community endeavors such as policies or laws? Address any reasonable resistances to your proposed solution(s). Cite credible sources as needed. (6-9 pages)

Choose by assessing what the audience needs

In a typical school writing project, one primary audience is the instructor, and one of your primary goals is to meet their evaluation criteria. Even if "choose an appropriate topic" is not stated on the assignment sheet or the rubric, that criterion is implied in the assignment—and a well-chosen topic will help you solve other writing problems more easily.

In order to meet the expectations of your instructor audience, you should aim to choose a topic that is *right* for the assignment, that is *viable* given the constraints of the class, and that is at least a little *unexpected*, so that you can avoid bland ideas and demonstrate that you are learning to think in the advanced ways of your field or discipline.

Explore topics that are right for your instructor/class

Most assignment prompts give some direct guidelines and even some examples of "right" topics. Sample 2 above suggests the issue of the chemical arsenic occurring in rice (if you'd never heard of that, you can look it up), and Sample 1 suggests cross-cultural relationships, which might make you think of the science-fiction movie *Avatar* (with blue aliens on a distant planet) or a classic movie like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (featuring a cross-racial couple in the 1960s).

You will want to read the prompt carefully to be sure you have decoded the key steps. Sample 1 requires that you identify both a theory and a movie, for instance, so you need to think about both parts.

Your goal in this step is to generate a list of *several* possibilities that are all inside the boundaries of the assignment, for two reasons. First, having several *right* possibilities to start with will give you more to choose from as you try to avoid *poor* and *bland* topics. Second, you know that as you write, you learn: by the third or fourth item in your list, your brain is warming up to the task, and you are likely to come up with better *right* ideas than when you started. (Could you generate a list of 10 movies that focus on relationship conflicts?)

Identify several viable topic areas for the task

You will need to make a viable choice given the *constraints* of the assignment. Be realistic about your resources: if you need to use secondary sources about your topic—a movie, journal articles, interviews—be sure that these will be available to you. If the assignment calls for an analysis of a problem or argument, as in Samples 2 and 3, be sure that educated people are still disagreeing about it. And if you need to analyze a particular kind of scenario, as in Sample 1, be sure that it is present: perhaps *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* doesn't have enough examples that match current theories about cross-cultural communication.

Your choice also needs to be viable given the *goals* of the assignment. You need to demonstrate your *way of thinking* about a complex problem in this exact field. In response to the Sample 3 assignment, you could write a lot about why you think there needs to be more parking on campus, but if you cannot propose a reasonable solution for individuals or the community to take—one that doesn't require money growing on trees—you won't be demonstrating the kind of problem-solving analysis that the class has focused on. You might think back: where in the class so far have you seen puzzles, controversies, or conflicting principles that require specialized analysis? what elements of the current assignment are parallel to those past puzzles?

Your most viable topic for demonstrating the depth of your knowledge is often a topic where you cannot think of one single right answer. As you consider Sample 2 you might think, for instance, that most everyone agrees that DDT is a terribly harmful chemical, but you might find scientists who argue that DDT is still the most effective way to kill the mosquitos that transmit malaria, which kills more than half a million people every year. So DDT is not just a chemical with a negative image; it's a chemical with a *complicated* image, part negative, part positive.

Look for unexpected topic areas related to the course

Assuming your topic area is within boundaries, feasible given the constraints, and focused on a complex way of thinking, one last audience expectation to try to meet is to *avoid bland*, obvious topics. Your instructor does not expect you to be 100% unique and original. But the less obvious angle is nearly always more interesting for both writers and readers. If you choose to write about cross-cultural communication in a movie like *Avatar* that is obviously about the failure of cross-cultural communication between greedy colonists and nature-worshipping aliens, you won't have to work very hard to spot a few examples—and that may lead you restate ordinary ideas about communication rather than thinking like a communications expert.

Sometimes simply changing the angle of how you look at topic will help you see an unexpected line of inquiry—the way that looking through a microscope, or lying down with your camera and looking sideways, can help you see a familiar object in a new way. If you *narrow* your view in thinking about *Avatar*, for instance, you could follow only the female characters as you analyzed conversations across

cultures. If you look sideways, you could play with the meaning of "cross-cultural" and see that there are "military" and "explorer" cultures in both the human and the alien groups that you could use in your analysis.

If you scout for an even less conspicuous part of a topic, or a surprising combination, you might find additional options. What if you kept the same movie—*Avatar*—but analyzed it looking for examples of a different communication pattern, such as discussions between superiors and inferiors? When you go out on a limb or challenge your assumptions, you could stay with a familiar subject, and also give yourself the best chance to demonstrate your most powerful, complicated thinking.

Explore 5.5

Choose one of the sample assignments above, an assignment for another class, or an assignment you're working on now, then brainstorm options. List at least five chemicals, movies, local problems, or other topic areas, and score each one. For each criterion—right, viable, and unexpected based on a college instructor's expectations—indicate whether it is a strong fit (score = 3), an average fit (score = 2) or a low fit (score = 1). For instance, for Sample Assignment 2, you might score "ethanol" as Right=3 but Viable=1, because it has so many uses you can't do justice to it in a short assignment. When you're done, write a sentence explaining either the main problems with the *worst* topic you came up with, or the main benefits of the *best* topic you came up with, considering the audience's expectations.

Choose by finding a personal, professional, and/or intellectual connection

You will gain the most advantage from a "choose a topic" situation if you can link the assignment to a topic that has already chosen you. Occasionally, you will be lucky: you will be asked to write about "solving a neighborhood or community problem" just as you have joined a community group that is asking the city to create more soccer fields for youth teams to play on. Then you will be motivated and focused from the start and you can move on to solving other writing problems with attention and energy. Other times, you will not easily be able to think of (or connect to) a writing topic: there may not be a neighborhood problem that is small enough to write about but still interesting to you.

You may be tempted just to pick a topic at random, even though you know that that would be a poor investment of your time. If you choose too quickly, you could easily pick a topic that is *wrong* for you (it has no interest for or connection to you whatsoever), a topic that is *poor* for you (it is too big for you to learn about in the time allotted, or it is too small or too factual for you to contribute any significant analysis to), or a topic that is too *bland* for you (it is so obvious or so distant from your lived experience that you will have no new insights to offer about it).

In order to meet your goals as an engaged writer completing a school assignment, you should try to choose a topic that is *right* for you and what you are connected to, that is *viable* given how your brain works, and that is at least a little *unexpected*, so that you can gain motivation as you solve intriguing problems that have relevance to your personal, academic, or professional life.

Explore topics that are connected to your interests

"Six degrees of separation" is the name of a popular social network theory, 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.

It's likely that the general topic area of your current class writing assignment is closer than you think to topics you are interested in. If you can identify a topic that is only five steps away, or perhaps only one or two steps, you will have found a topic that is "right" for you, and that will help you have a more engaged writing experience.

The instructor who assigned Sample 1 doesn't necessarily want you to choose a boring award-winning foreign film with dull people yammering on all the time (unless you love those kinds of films). They want you to think about how communication problems occur in the world you regularly live in, so if you watch cheerleading movies or download animations based on graphic novels or secretly love old Bugs Bunny cartoons, you could start by fishing around in your head near those connection points. Alternately, think about what kinds of communication problems really annoy you: cross-cultural problems may not bother you much, but cross-gender or cross-power problems may pose more frequent frustrations.

Finally, remember that you don't have to "fall in love" with your topic. Instead, you can look for a topic that connects to your academic or professional goals. Perhaps you can draw on issues or texts from other classes you are taking. Or consider your current (or hoped-for) workspace: if you take fifteen minutes to really look around your office or workspace, you could probably identify a communication problem, a possibly dangerous or disreputable chemical, or a nagging problem that your office community faces every day. You may not initially identify the most exciting, passion-creating topic— but because you will begin with a true connection, you may find that it becomes a good fit for you more quickly than you expect.

Identify viable topics by exploring specific instances

Writers outside school who are chosen by topics nearly always wish the topics were smaller and tamer. We know that writing a quick text message would be easier if this friend of ours didn't get annoyed so quickly and turn everything into a drama, or that writing a letter about our child being bullied would be faster if it had only happened one time, not four times this month. Narrow, focused issues are easier to handle, given limits to time and resources.

A school writer who is told to "choose a topic," on the other hand, may be tempted to choose ideas that are huge or seem profound. Perhaps a broad, general topic like "chemicals in air pollution" is the first thing that occurs to that student, or eases their concern that they won't have enough to say to fill six pages. But a narrower topic has the best chance of being fully connected to you and allowing you to show off your expertise. Only one or two percent of "traffic problems in the city" are *your* exact problems, but a narrower angle such as "lack of direct bus service covering west-side routes to the university" may connect you directly to street names you know, delays you are stuck in every Tuesday morning, and the stories your neighbors tell about being late for class.

Choose an unexpected topic by seeking out puzzles

A common piece of writing advice is, "Write about what you know about." That advice is sensible but incomplete. If we wrote about what we were completely certain about, we would all write encyclopedia entries, which would be very bland (or we would write political rants for television talk shows, which would be exciting but wouldn't demonstrate much learning). It might make better sense to tell writers, "Write about what you know *and are curious* about."

Your questions are important at the start because a large part of what motivates writers is not our interest ("this issue is about me") but our intrigue ("this issue is a *problem*"). We don't get excited about climbing mountains because they're *there*, but because they're there and they're a *problem*: they are difficult to climb. We play games because they pose problems; as soon as we solve all the problems, we stop playing the game. Even a hard day at work goes a lot faster when we are trying to solve an interesting problem.

This advice can seem counterintuitive for a school assignment: writers who feel unmotivated often look for topics with the fewest puzzles to solve, which seem like they will provide the easiest pathways to follow. But your brain is built to find satisfaction in inquiry and discovery. Instead of paving more parking lots, you can look for a new component, process, or combination of elements that hasn't been fully explored: is there a new car-sharing or bicycle-sharing company in your area that could solve transportation problems, or a way to use a new idea like social media to revive an old idea like carpooling? In order to stay connected to a "choose your topic" project, so that you can stay motivated and engaged, you should identify areas of uncertainty or difficulty, and move directly to them.

While you are writing in school (and in some workplaces), you may often have to go through the steps of "choosing a topic." To be the most engaged with and committed to your project, you should explore topics that are *right* for your audience and for you; topics that are *viable* given your resources, constraints, and interests; and especially topics that are *unexpected* and so give you room to think deeply and insightfully about a puzzle, so that readers will want to find out your new answers.

Remember that your goal is not to choose a topic that seems easy or simple—nor to choose one that seems profound or impressive—but to choose one that might in other circumstances *have chosen you*.

Explore 5.6

Think about a friend or relative whose life or personality is very different from yours. Then imagine that both of you are responding to the same writing assignment: either one of the samples above or another one you've recently received in school. Write a few sentences comparing possible topics that connect to each of you differently: "To select an *unexpected* movie, Demetrius would probably select something like _____, because he always is working on questions about _____, but I would connect better to a film like _____ because I usually am curious about _____."

5.3 Reflect to Identify Your Difficulties and Resources

In order to complete your writing task efficiently, you need to be able to accurately estimate what will be difficult, why it will be difficult, and how you will cope with those difficulties. For instance, it's not true that writing a short text message is always easy and writing a longer research-based argument essay is always hard. If you are texting a friend with sad or unwelcome news, you might agonize over every word choice; if you are writing an argument essay about a cause you have already researched extensively and believe strongly in, the writing might seem straightforward and even enjoyable.

Writing difficulty is affected by a range of factors: some are built into the project itself, while others depend on the expectations of the audience or the resources or dispositions of the writer. The same writing task can be easy one week and hard the next week, easier for one writer and harder for another. Likewise, writers bring multiple kinds of resources to a writing task: in some cases, a writer's prior knowledge of the subject or previous experiences composing similar documents will smooth the way, while in others, the writer's high confidence or motivation will be a determining factor.

When you can identify likely difficulties before you begin a writing task, you will be able to prepare to meet them; in some cases, you may be able to reframe the project to minimize them. And when you can identify your resources, you can leverage them strategically to improve your process and strengthen the final document.

Identify difficulties

Writing difficulty is rhetorical: it is affected by the writer's knowledge, goals, resources, dispositions, and experiences, as well as by the readers' knowledge,

needs, expectations, and situation. The chart below uses language about writing principles that may help you predict elements of a writing project that will raise or lower its difficulty.
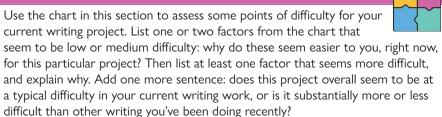
As you review this chart thinking of your own project, consider each factor separately. The factors are related to one another, but each can provide a distinctive challenge in a writing project; it's not unusual for a writer to decide that several factors rank in the lower-difficulty range, but that one or two areas seem much more difficult and may by themselves affect the overall perception of difficulty. Moreover, since you are judging the difficulty for yourself as a writer, you don't need to agree with other people about what's hard or how hard it is. You don't even need to agree with this chart: if a factor is listed as "medium difficulty" but your experience helps you predict that it will not be much of a problem for you on this project, then rely on your own judgment.

You should also explore how other areas of your work as a writer produce higher or lower difficulty for you. You might consider your current workload or your past experience with similar projects; you might face a challenge specific to this project (working with a new video edizting tool, collaborating with other writers, or writing about an issue that raises strong personal emotional responses) or you might face a broader challenge such as systemic discrimination or a significant change in your home or work environment.

	Lower Difficulty	Medium Difficulty	Higher Difficulty
Writer's goal(s)	The writer's goal is simple and singular (summarize an easy text or describe one event).	The writer addresses a more complex goal (analyze causality) or engages several angles or perspectives.	The project has multiple goals (e.g., analyze and then argue) and/or engages with difficult or complicated issues across many perspectives.
Writer's knowledge	The writer is an expert on the topic and subtopics, knows all the details and has studied it well; the project addresses exact readers whom the writer knows well.	The writer has some knowledge of the topic at the level and in the ways that the readers will expect; the project addresses broader or less familiar audiences.	The writer is a newcomer to the topic and must learn both information and ways of thinking about it; the project addresses unknown and/or very diverse readers.
Writer's insight	The writer is only summarizing or describing accepted, uncontroversial information.	The writer provides some analysis or argumentation supported by reasons or evidence.	The writer creates new knowledge or perspectives through argument or synthesis, using evidence and addressing assumptions or multiple viewpoints.

	Lower Difficulty	Medium Difficulty	Higher Difficulty
Reader's knowledge and/or resistance	Readers are already very familiar with the topic and are inclined to believe and/or trust the writer.	Readers are generally interested in the topic but may not be inclined to learn or act (for or against) based on one reading.	Readers do not know, trust, and/or agree with the writer; they do not know the topic and/or they strongly resist the writer's purpose; the writer may be facing systemic discrimination.
Genre, design, and style	The genre is familiar and straightforward (e.g., basic essay or memo) and the expected diction and style match the writer's "natural" language.	The genre is less familiar and/or requires some design elements (layout or images); the expected diction and style require the writer to use some unfamiliar or specialized language.	The project requires a complex and/or unfamiliar genre or design elements (e.g., instructional video, grant proposal); the writer must skillfully employ highly specialized, unfamiliar, and/or precise diction.
Steps and strategies	The project has relatively few steps or complicating factors; it requires strategies familiar to the writer; much of the project work is within the writer's control.	The project requires the writer to learn a few new strategies or cope with some unfamiliar or tricky steps in completing the project; some elements are not within the writer's control.	The project has multiple steps, strategies, and/or external constraints that require the writer to perform in consistently unfamiliar or challenging working conditions.
Risk and time	The project is low priority or low-stakes, carries no risk for the writer, and/or can easily be completed within the available time.	The writer has a stake in the success of this project or faces uncomfortable consequences if it fails; the project will need some planning to be completed in the available time.	The writer strongly wants and/or needs this project to be successful; success requires careful scheduling and management to be completed in limited available time.
Writer's confidence and motivation	The writer is highly confident and strongly motivated about completing this project.	The writer is either confident or motivated about completing the project.	The writer significantly lacks confidence and/or motivation about this project.
Writer's agency	The writer finds a comfortable balance with the ability to make some decisions but also meet some reasonable expectations set by others.	The writer faces challenges with a project that asks for some hard decisions or requires meeting some tricky external expectations.	The writer is overwhelmed by too many complex decisions or is frustrated by the need to meet multiple and/or very precise external demands.

Explore 5.7

Use the chart in this section to assess some points of difficulty for your current writing project. List one or two factors from the chart that seem to be low or medium difficulty: why do these seem easier to you, right now, for this particular project? Then list at least one factor that seems more difficult, and explain why. Add one more sentence: does this project overall seem to be at a typical difficulty in your current writing work, or is it substantially more or less difficult than other writing you've been doing recently?

Identify resources

The point of identifying difficulties isn't to sap your confidence or make you decide just to write a basic description about Nevada's state insect, but the exact opposite: to give you opportunity to identify all of the strengths and resources you can apply toward the complex, intriguing project that resonates with your goals and principles as a writer.

Identify resources you already have: Even if these seem obvious or common, when you take time to list them you can improve your navigation of a writing project and build your confidence.

- Your knowledge of and/or interest in the topic or issue you are writing about
- Your prior experience writing about this issue, in a similar genre or style, and/or for a similar audience
- Your support community, which may include peers, an instructor or supervisor, librarians or technology advisers, or others who can provide information or encouragement
- Your dispositions, whether you are feeling intrinsically motivated or just ready to plan and persist, and whether you are feeling confident about your skills or just open to the possibilities about this project

Identify resources you can and should readily access: Instead of running into a problem halfway through your draft at 2:00 am, you can use your lower-stress, fully awake brain right now to predict resources that will help you write.

- Information from primary and secondary resources that will help you describe a problem precisely, explain key causes or effects, or support your recommendations to your readers
- Writing strategies that you think will help you generate sentences, (re)organize a draft, or address readers' resistances if you get stuck
- Information or feedback you can gather from people you know well—or

others in your larger community who may have relevant expertise—to help you draft and revise your document

- New stories you can tell yourself (such as "fake it 'til you make it" or "envision yourself succeeding") that will help you improve your confidence, motivation, or self-regulation and persistence when the project gets difficult

Identify some "stretch" resources: These are "wouldn't it be nice" resources, so that if you have a little extra time or happen to spot the exact right article in a database, you can be ready to take advantage of it. What if you could find out exactly how many people at your school use public transportation, or what the scriptwriter for *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* most wanted viewers to learn? They might be "just in case" resources that you don't *think* you'll need, but that might turn out to be useful, like a transcript of a recent city council meeting or the past year's water quality reports from the EPA. Don't keep your stretch resources hidden: these can be great questions to ask a librarian or a colleague who may have more access or strategies to help you learn what you want.

Completing these prediction exercises regarding your project's difficulties and your resources will help you now, but also help you in future writing projects:

- As you start future projects, you should become able to more accurately specify some difficulties you expect to encounter in a writing task, and develop a plan to respond to those challenges.

- As you engage in future writing projects, you should feel more confidence and control, because you will encounter fewer surprises, and you will be able to separate "what is difficult in this project" from "whether I am a good/bad writer overall."

- Over the long term, as you practice predicting difficulty, you will improve both at anticipating how writing can be challenging and developing strategies to help you meet those difficulties and solve writing problems, which will increase your confidence as a writer.

Because writers have to produce so many kinds of writing—in a single year of school, in our professional offices, in our communities—we need good strategies for adapting to new and unfamiliar writing tasks. In addition, we know that writing evolves: twenty years ago, there was no Twitter (or X), and twenty years from now, you may be writing in a genre or style that hasn't been invented yet. The more strategies you have for identifying the expectations, opportunities, and difficulties involved in a writing project, the better prepared you'll be to meet those new situations and write successfully in them.

Explore 5.8

Write yourself a short, confidence-boosting letter (4-5 sentences): "Dear Self, Here are some key resources you should use for this project." If you identified difficulties in a previous exercise, try to identify some resources that directly address those. You could also or instead address resources that come from your past experience, new strategies you have been learning, research you can conduct, or people you can consult with. Conclude with a sentence about your larger goals: what do you most want to learn or accomplish as you work on this writing task?

5.4 Make a Personal Writing Plan

Research shows that experts differ from novices not just in their skill at completing a task, but in their ability to quickly and accurately review a new situation and select the most effective response. Just as you'll have a faster drive across an unfamiliar city if you plan your route ahead of time so that you can avoid construction areas and typical traffic jams, you will experience more success, efficiency, and satisfaction with a writing project when you take time to reflect to predict about your agency, focus, challenges, and resources.

This process can eventually become second nature, but as you work to improve your skills at analyzing and predicting your best approach to a project, you will need to make a more conscious effort. A short writing project may need just a few quick reflective notes, while a longer or more complex project may benefit from several rounds of prediction.

DEAL with your project

You may find it helpful to use the DEAL approach to predicting your writing project.

- **Define** your rhetorical context: What are your goals, interests, and knowledge, and how do they interact with your readers' expectations and needs?
- **Explore** writing strategies, opportunities, and constraints: Use some of the exercises noted below, consult with peers or experts, or use your own "getting started" strategies to help you envision your best pathway through the project.
- **Act** to identify or acquire resources you might need: Like a scout whose motto is "always be prepared," you can use your planning time to remind yourself of resources you already have and begin gathering other resources you predict you will need.
- **Look and learn** about your prediction skills: Over time, you should notice that your predictions become more accurate, which should lower your stress level and improve your confidence as a writer.

Practice

- To practice **considering the moves and scope** of a project, try <u>Audience Profile</u>, <u>Six Structures</u>, <u>Stance Switch</u>, or <u>Subtopic Generator</u>.
- To practice **analyzing the genre** of a writing project, try <u>Genre Ethnography</u> or <u>Not-talk</u>.
- To practice **choosing a topic** that's right, viable, and unexpected, try
  - <u>Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List</u>
  - <u>Cousin Topics</u>
  - <u>Date My Topic</u>
  - <u>Gray-area Finder</u>
  - <u>Magic Three Choices</u>
  - <u>Out on a Limb</u>
  - <u>Six Degrees</u>
  - <u>Ten Ways to Choose a Topic</u>
- To practice identifying difficulties and resources, try
  - <u>Attitude Inventory</u>
  - <u>Deluxe Project Scheduler</u>
  - <u>Learn-write Timeline</u>
  - <u>Problem-solver Parallels</u>
  - <u>Write the Problem</u>