Writing to Serve Readers

by

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Chapter I: Writing as Service

“My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King; My tongue is the pen of a ready writer” (Ps. 45:1 NASB).

When I learned to write my name in kindergarten, I came home and inscribed it in the arm of my mother’s wooden rocking chair . . . and I’ve been writing ever since. Reading opened worlds that drew me into a new reality as they revealed truth and beauty I’d never before imagined. But writing allowed me to create worlds founded in my own experience, fueled by my reading, and stirred by my imagination; writing allowed me to create the world as I somehow knew it ought to be. My early stories were filled with childish melodrama, to be sure (I dimly recall capsizing sailboats and burning barns), but they always ended with justice served and brokenness reconciled – the purpose, I knew without its ever being said, of story.

The older I grew and the more brokenness entered my world, the more important writing became to me, and I learned that all writing – not just my beloved stories – is meant to address brokenness and hope. Even business memos, lab reports, and academic essays are a stay against confusion, creating order from the seeming chaos of this world east of Eden. Writing can do this because its purpose is to serve: to serve the writer – helping him to process his observations and place them into a framework; to serve the reader – helping him to more clearly see and understand the world and thoughtfully consider how to live well within it; and to serve God, the Creator of language – to give back to Him praise and trust and wonder for the gift and for the truth He has revealed, beauty and hope in the midst of the brokenness caused by our sin. “Why are we here?” Annie Dillard asks in The Writing Life, and answers, “Propter chorum: [ . . . ] for the sake of the choir.” We are here to offer praise to God and to lead and encourage our neighbors to do the same. There is no greater – indeed, for the believer, no other – purpose.

Writing ought to serve the writer by drawing him out of himself in pursuit of truth. When we put words on a page, we are forced to more clearly articulate meaning, to understand what we think we know. A seeming insight scurrying through the mind’s labyrinth may reveal itself as banal or obvious, wrong-headed or simply incoherent. George Orwell, in “Politics and the English Language,” remarks that clear writing has the advantage of transparency: “when you make a stupid remark, its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself.” We are not set here to be confused and foolish, acting without thought, and writing is one of the ways we seek understanding, of both the world we observe and our own selves within that world.

But writing does not serve the writer if used to pursue self-gratification through the world’s recognition and honor; writing is not, in its proper use, about the writer but about the writing, about the truth. The writer who desires to serve himself by gaining prestige or wealth cannot simultaneously serve the reader, God, or truth. Dillard explains that writers write because they love the materials and possibilities of the work, not because they want recognition, and if the world “flap[s] at them some sort of hat” they will ignore it as much as possible in order to keep writing.

Writing ought to serve the Creator of language by honoring His unique gift to us. Our words should be wells of life, not swords of death, bearing the holiness of their Giver into the world of His creation. As He gave us the Word written and the Word incarnate, all our words should
glorify Him; we do this by using them only truthfully, only when they bear significance (and significance includes delight and laughter as well as serious profundity), and only in love. We honor the Giver by our holy use of His gift in service to Him and to our neighbor.

Writing ought to serve readers – our neighbors. This is the primary focus of this book, with service to the writer considered as part of the process of writing, and service to God as the foundation of writing: how can we serve our readers most effectively unless we seek and serve truth? The great writers who did not know God served the truth they did know, however skewed it may have been; and no one, however wise, will ever know and speak all truth and only truth in this broken world. It is, however, our responsibility to pursue it steadfastly, and to remember always that believers are held to the highest standard: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:6); and “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29). Bringing these three locuses of service together – writer, reader, God – we can say that writing is the art of serving readers through a process that leads to effective communication of truth.

Writing is an Art

“Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Pr. 22:29 NASB).

Only a few writers achieve high art through their extraordinary creativity and aptitude with words. However, rarity of genius is no excuse to settle for artless mediocrity; any literate adult can achieve the art of skilled craftsmanship. To develop this skill requires first a clear understanding of the art pursued – its purpose, its nature, its process. After that come observation and analysis, practice, criticism and coaching, followed by yet more practice: the only avenue to mastery of an art, no matter if it is that of shooting lay-ups on a basketball court, playing cello in an orchestra, stitching a Texas star quilt – or writing, whether a memo, a letter, a researched essay, a political argument, a novel.

Too many inexperienced writers labor under the delusion that writing well belongs to only a select few, that good writers have some sort of extraordinary gift of simply putting words on the page beautifully without more than minor editing: that writing, in other words, is an art in the sense that only the specially talented can accomplish it well. Because they must struggle to some degree with accurately articulating their thoughts on paper, they think they “can’t write” – and never shall be able to. This is not what we mean by writing’s being an art, however. Rather, “art” is here used in the broader sense of creative skill: creativity is foundational to communication (except for some common formulas such as “how are you?” every sentence you have ever spoken or written has almost certainly been unique, never spoken or written before), and all people of normal intelligence can learn the skills needed to use this creativity effectively.

Of course ten-talent writers exist – but they are few in any generation, and no one expects most people to reach their level. They do, however, offer us models to imitate, beauty to reach for, as we diligently develop our own one or two or five talents to put to use in light of our Lord’s return, stretching ourselves to do the best we can with what we have been given.
**Writing is to Serve Readers**

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29 NASB).

The real art of writing is the art of service. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves: what do we wish for in the writing we read? We wish for clarity, truthfulness, challenge, hope. Therefore, let us offer these to our readers in love.

Craftsmanship is the surface level of serving our readers. Writing needs to be as clear as we can make it if we hope for readers to share our journey and end up at the same destination. However, being clear is not the same as being simplistic; no one enjoys Dick and Jane after the first or second grade. Sentences can be challenging to the reader, making him think and work for the ideas, but it must be the thought that makes him work, not incompetent or sloppy syntax. One way we honor our readers, in fact, is assuming they can understand and appreciate reasonably complex writing. Organization adds to clarity, of course, helping readers to follow the logic of an argument, as do the signposts of structure – key words and transitions.

But excellent craftsmanship is worthless unless it is in the service of truth. We serve readers most importantly by offering them what we have discovered to be true. We do not tickle their ears with lies that make them comfortable; we speak the truth in love so that they may be brought closer to wholeness in their being and in their living. This responsibility should make us approach the use of language, written or spoken, with fear and trembling; we should not simply slop words on a page or let them flow from our mouths with little or no thought, without the hard work to find truth, without the careful crafting that makes the truth we offer clear.

And we always face the possibility of failure: sometimes what we think is the truth turns out to be skewed or outright false, and we must be prepared to make amends. Sometimes we write or speak in haste or anger or self-righteousness; sometimes what we believe to be clear is inaccessible to our readers or hearers. Our words and our lives are fallen.

Yet we cannot be silent because we cannot be perfect. We mar all that we touch, Dillard reminds us, but to act is better than to let our lives be a blank, lived in meaningless pursuit of self-gratification, worthless to ourselves, our neighbors, and our God. Rather, we recognize, along with the possibility of failure, the worthiness of our pursuit: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” What higher or more important quest is there than the quest for truth? Even if we find a mere fragment of it, that fragment can enrich our lives and help us toward finding further fragments, fitting them together, seeing more and more of the puzzle and growing closer to the ideal we are meant to be. This is the truth we offer to our readers.

**Writing is a Process**

The Lord to Moses on the building of the tabernacle: “According to all I am going to show you, [. . .] just so you shall construct it. [. . .] See that you make them after the pattern for them, which was shown to you on the mountain” (Ex. 25: 9, 40 NASB).

Effective writing doesn’t come from the writer’s mind fully formed on the first try. Rather, the writer follows a process, a plan, which leads from the first amorphous idea to a final text that
helps the reader to understand the truth the writer has discovered. This book is structured in part by the stages of the writing process – prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading, and submitting – but it’s important to keep in mind that these are neither as discrete nor as linear as a list makes them appear; they overlap in a recursive process in which drafting shows the need for further pre-writing activity, editing leads back to revision, and so on.

So why break it down into stages at all? Because it is too easy for younger or less experienced writers to believe that drafting and proofreading are sufficient to the task, to forget or not yet know that prewriting, revision, and editing are indispensable tasks. Defining and describing these, with the understanding that they take place in relation with each other, helps us to see the scope of the responsibility that writers have, and to know how to ensure that we have not overlooked vital ways of making our texts as effective – truthful and interesting and clear – as they can be.

Prewriting
This is the stage in which we consider the context of the writing task and look for information with which to accomplish it. What is the idea we are pursuing, the question we seek an answer to? For whom do we wish to articulate our conclusions, and why? Once we begin to understand the context of this particular task, we begin to gather information: we brainstorm, research, talk and think about the subject, maybe create outlines or free write. This part of the process often helps us to decide what we know and believe; it is a process of discovery, and we may find that our answer to the question we are exploring may change, as well as our purpose for the writing.

Drafting
Drafting usually comes quite naturally during and after prewriting; it simply means the stage in which we finally complete a draft which has an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, from which we can begin to evaluate how well our writing sets forth our ideas and what we need to improve so that it will effectively serve our readers.

Revision
Revision has to do with re-envisioning the entire work, considering what we call “global” concerns: Is the controlling idea of my text clear and have I followed it throughout? Have I supported it with sufficient, relevant evidence, analysis, and explanation? Is it organized logically and helpfully for the reader? Does the introduction draw the reader in and establish the subject, the angle, and the tone of the work? Does the conclusion draw out the importance, the significance, of the subject?

This is the stage that young or inexperienced writers are likely to overlook. The tendency is to create a draft with great effort, and, in the relief of finding words on the page, to “look it over,” correct a comma error or two, and feel that it’s done.

However, this is exactly the stage that experienced writers uniformly consider the most essential of the process. Some writers even call the initial draft a “zero” draft. It’s just words on paper from which to begin creating a work worthy of a reader’s time and effort. This is the stage in which we re-envision, our work to find if it is truthful, if it is informative and/or persuasive; we ask what needs to be added, deleted, substituted, rearranged to serve our readers’ needs.
Editing
Editing, on the other hand, has to do with the effectiveness of each individual sentence and its relation to the sentences directly around it. In this stage we strive for conciseness, making sure every word does necessary work, ridding the sentences of flabby phrases and superfluous words; we ask how a sentence can be rearranged to emphasize the appropriate ideas and to make clear and smooth transitions; we check every word for precision of meaning and replace vague and weak nouns and verbs; we ensure that the tone and style are consistent throughout.

Of course, much editing accompanies revising, but experienced writers never assume that the sentences are the best they can be merely because the overall structure and information are accurate. Rather, they check every sentence and word to be certain that these are appropriate and effective for their purpose and for their readers.

Proofreading
I use “proofreading” here as distinct from editing because all wise writers check their work one last time (or two or three “last” times) to be sure that they have caught the smallest errors. Editing a sentence sometimes results in a word or phrase left in or taken out that we don’t notice at the time. It’s easy to leave out an important comma simply because the mind has been supplying a pause for the last ten drafts. Spell check won’t catch real words that aren’t the words we intend; I have to use the “find” feature at this stage, searching for every instance of the word “form” to be sure that I didn’t really mean “from” – my fingers seem determined never to type the latter word. Of course, writers check much of this while editing, but leaving the work alone for awhile and returning for that final run-through, reading it slowly aloud, word by word and sentence by sentence, is an essential part of the process, serving readers by not startling them out of the message to notice some silly error instead.

Writing is Effective Communication
“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances” (Pr. 25:11 NASB).

Anyone can put words on the page; the question is whether the words on the page do their task effectively, helping the reader toward understanding of the subject. Unfortunately, many students arrive in college with the idea that writing occurs in a classroom situation with the teacher as the only audience – a teacher who is going to mark grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors, and perhaps judge whether a 5-paragraph formula structure has been correctly followed. Writing in the real world, however, is not effective when merely mechanically correct, and the 5-paragraph formula is only rarely an effective structural scaffold.

Writing in the real world, rather, is judged to be effective by how well it conveys its message for a real-world audience, an audience who will or will not believe and/or act on that message. This, of course, brings us back to context: for whom am I writing this piece, and why? What do they already know, what do they need to learn, what do we have in common that I can build on, what will be the clearest and/or most persuasive examples and explanations I can offer them?
No writing can be deemed effective without some idea of its context. If I am instructed to gather information and write a report on the various kinds of writing centers that exist, so that my department can begin designing one to meet our college’s needs, and I write a beautiful essay about the tutors who worked for me in a writing center in the past, my essay is useless and ineffective, insulting even — no matter how beautifully and meticulously crafted — because it does not meet my readers’ needs and thus wastes their valuable time. Very few forms of nonfiction writing do not have specific audiences and specific purposes; almost all the nonfiction writing you will use in and beyond college will require that you understand how to assess and meet the needs of real readers who will act on your words. Therefore, the work assigned in your college composition class includes contexts for you to consider, and is evaluated on how well you are able to respond to those contexts.

Writing is Communication of Truth

“In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us” (Titus 2:7-8 NASB).

Integrity is the foundation of effective communication; we must be trustworthy in all that we say and write if we are to serve our readers. Even small errors will make readers tune out the rest of what is said: if, to use a real-world example, the writer doesn’t bother to find out that the Kansas City Chiefs are not a baseball team, why should I trust her to have accurately researched more important elements of her subject, such as Kansas City laws and police procedures which she criticizes?

Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” because he wished to be free from the responsibility of an innocent man’s death. Pilate meant to imply that truth cannot be known, but in fact the question has a different answer: truth is that which is in accord with the Word given us by the Creator. This means, simply, that nothing which goes against the Word of God can be true; it does not, of course, mean that all specific truths are contained explicitly in the Word.

To take a seemingly irrelevant example from the workplace: Your boss wants a recommendation on whether to purchase Windows or Mac computers for the office staff. What does this have to do with the assertion I’ve made about truth being in accord with Scripture — surely God does not care which brand of computer to buy? Perhaps not — but He does care that we make daily decisions in the light of integrity, and this means that you will not simply recommend the brand you personally prefer. Instead, you will research all the needs of the staff, then research both computer brands thoroughly to find which one meets those needs best — and that you will present the result of your research clearly and honestly to your boss, even if it is not to your personal liking.

Truth, in other words, has to do with the process of communication as much as the product: we must seek with integrity what to say, and the work we produce must reflect that integrity.

Writing is the art of serving readers through a process that leads to effective communication of truth: the rest of this book will visit the writing process in more depth while exploring and expanding the elements of this definition as they affect each stage.
Chapter II: Context

“Do not let any unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29 NASB).

A friend of mine who worked as the comptroller in a bank once sent a memo to all the bank’s department heads requesting certain information. Unfortunately, the department heads did not have that information; only the next level up, division heads, had the information he was seeking. He spent hours on the phone that week, explaining his mistake to the department heads and re-routing the memo to division heads, then meeting with each of them separately to get the information in the time frame in which he needed it.

Because he had misread the context of his writing task, he had created confusion, wasted a great deal of his own time as well as the time of others, and lost some of his credibility as an administrator. As he told the business writing students to whom he was speaking, just a short amount of time considering the context of his memo before writing it up and sending it out would have saved him hours of time later.

It helps to visualize the context of any writing task as a triangle, each point of which is related to the others, and all driven by the writer’s purpose:

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message

purpose

writer audience
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**Purpose**

We write for various purposes which often overlap, but most writing focuses predominantly on one of these three: informative, persuasive, and expressive.

**Informative**

The writer is giving readers information on an issue (this kind of writing is often called “explication”).

Examples: an auditor writes a report on the financial state of a company; an engineer explains how a hybrid car engine works; a scientist shares the results of an experimental study with his colleagues.

**Persuasive**

The writer wishes to convince readers to embrace a belief or a particular position on an issue.
Examples: a scientist publishes an article in a scientific journal trying to convince other scientists that Intelligent Design theory is viable; a student government group writes a proposal to the college’s Student Life staff trying to persuade them to change the school dress code; a citizen writes a letter to the editor of his local newspaper trying to persuade other citizens to support the construction of a new factory in order to bring more jobs to the area.

Expressive
A writer shares from personal experience to entertain readers and/or encourage them to think about an issue.

Examples: a writer writes a book about the sacrifices and joys of the writing life; a Christian writes a meditation on experiencing the love of God in the midst of a personal tragedy; a teacher tells stories from his classroom experience to make his readers laugh while showing them the joys, frustrations, and responsibilities of his profession.

Predominant and Overlapping Purposes
These three purposes will often overlap, of course, but one will almost always predominate over the others in a given piece. For example, persuasive writing requires information to be effective, and may use expressive elements to create a personal tone.

Informative writing is often persuasive to some degree simply because gaining knowledge usually leads to taking a position, and because the informative writer often can’t help at least suggesting a position he considers best, even if only by his word choice and the order in which he gives the information. However, it is possible to minimize this influence, and the writer with integrity does so when he is expected to be primarily informative. Although the informative writer may sometimes offer personal experience as an example of his subject, expressive writing is less commonly used because the tone is usually expected to be more objective.

Expressive writing may well form part of an explicitly persuasive piece by appearing as support for an argument, or may provide an example in a predominantly informative piece; it also is almost always somewhat persuasive simply by its nature: if I tell the story of a car wreck, I probably hope that readers will drive more carefully. However, the piece itself may not explicitly attempt to persuade readers to do this and would be classified as predominantly expressive.

Audience
Nonfiction writing almost always addresses specific audiences; essays and articles appear only in specific publications targeted toward a specific demographic. Of course, some of these audiences are broader than others: a magazine on quilting will have a smaller audience and a narrower range of topics than a newspaper or political magazine. No publication, however, reaches “people in general” – even very broadly published magazines such as Reader’s Digest are read by a specific demographic.

The audience of a publication – thus of an essay or article appearing in it – influences many of a writer’s decisions. If an audience is mostly career women, the writer will use different examples and even a different tone than when writing on a similar topic for an audience of mostly married
stay-at-home mothers. Addressing an audience of mostly Christians allows for a different approach to moral subjects than if the audience were almost entirely secular; Christians accept the Bible as authoritative, but natural law and pragmatic arguments will be a better starting point for those who do not recognize it as such. This is not to say that Biblical arguments should always be avoided for a secular audience, only that the writer’s use of them may need to be couched in different terms; it is quite possible to write from a Christian perspective without using specific, explicit Scriptural evidence, and there are times when this is the most effective approach. Expert audiences and lay audiences require different terminology and background information; persuading those in authority over the writer requires a different tone and approach than persuading those the writer leads. Of course, writers should not pander to their readers; we must always speak the truth in love. However, the means by which we deliver a message change – we don’t explain a concept the same way to a child, a layman, an expert; we don’t narrate an event the same way to a friend, an authority, a stranger. In no case do we need to be dishonest or deceptive; we simply need to craft the truth in ways most helpful to the audience we are addressing.

Remember, too, that when we analyze an essay, we need to know its intended audience; if we are not part of that audience, we must adjust our reading to take that fact into account, not expecting the essay to meet our needs and take into account our experience and knowledge. This is a helpful reminder that essays we write will only be effective if they actually address the concerns and questions and needs of the audience they are intended to reach.

The more we know about our audience, the better able we will be to choose examples that resonate with them, to know what background information we need to supply or terms we need to define, to know what values and assumptions we share with them, and so on. Not all information is important for every topic, of course; for example, political affiliation may not be important when discussing whether to support the building of a new factory, but would be very important in discussing many public policy issues. In any case, we will want to find as much information as possible, such as the following:

- age and gender
- locality (is the publication regional, national, or international?)
- economic status (are readers mostly upper-class, middle, lower?)
- values (what kind of worldview likely predominates among the readers?)
  - (if Christian, which denominations?)
- political affiliations
- career choices
- entertainment choices

Aspiring writers are told never to submit to a publication without reading several issues of it first. This is because most of the information listed above can be gleaned about its target audience from the submission guidelines, an assessment of the type of articles published and the advertising accepted, and the publisher’s notes about the publication (on a page near the front of a print publication or the “About” page on a website).
**Message**

Writers write because they have a message they wish to convey to readers. Sometimes they may know exactly what that message is when they sit down to write, but far more often they begin with a subject and work – through prewriting, drafting, and revising – to the specific and clear message of the final product. This message will be focused on a controlling idea (thesis: see below) that is intended to inform and/or move their readers. They will therefore begin and follow the process of developing a message with integrity, making both their work and their character trustworthy in order to earn a hearing. They will do careful and thorough research to be sure they understand the various viewpoints and portray them fairly, without denigrating those with whom they disagree, and being open to allowing their honest research to reshape their views. They will investigate claims made by others carefully and find reliable evidence for their own claims. They will be concerned with clarity: have they explained the message fully, given enough examples and information for readers to understand the message exactly? They will attend to matters of editing and proofreading so as to be precise and avoid distracting readers from the message by an appearance of sloppy or lazy work. Because the message is intended to benefit the readers, writers take all possible care to win them to hear and care about it.

**Controlling Idea of a Message**

The message of a piece of effective writing can be encapsulated in a single sentence: what is often called the “thesis statement,” but may also be called the “controlling idea” or the “primary assertion” or “primary claim.” Many students have been taught that a thesis statement is a sentence ending the first paragraph of an essay and containing three ideas that will be conveyed in the body of the essay and summarized in its conclusion – the formulaic 5-paragraph essay. This formula is a helpful model for such things as some essay exams and standardized tests, but real-world writers don’t write by formulas. Rather than filling in some preconceived structure, they begin with a question they wish to explore, an idea they believe is important, and they let that idea dictate the structure of an essay about it. To promote this process and keep us from reverting to the 5-paragraph formula, this resource will therefore be referring to an essay’s main point as its “controlling idea” or its “primary claim.”

The importance of a clear and effective controlling idea can hardly be overstated. Once a writer knows what this idea is, it will, in conjunction with an understanding of audience, control all the decisions he makes about the work: organization, information (background, definitions, examples, explanations, data, etc.), tone, diction and syntax, how to introduce and conclude the piece. This will be taken up in greater detail in the next chapter.

**Development of a Message**

Very rarely can we merely make an assertion about a subject and expect our readers to believe us. Rather, we need to support our assertions in a variety of ways which will help our readers to understand the subject and see the validity of the claims we have asserted. Also, we need to keep in mind that most of the assertions we make in persuasive writing are not “provable”: they are based on probabilities, not certainties. When we write to persuade, we are usually writing about future possibilities: if we follow A course of action, then B result will follow. However, no one can predict the future with absolute certainty – anything from C to Z might follow instead, depending on the variables of circumstance – so we build our case on examples of what has happened before, on analogies to similar situations, on logical analysis of information, on our
knowledge of human nature, and so on. Therefore, the strategies we use for developing essays do not consist of “proofs” in the sense of absolute certainty but of ways to demonstrate probability.

A simple example of this principle is a prediction like this one: Jon will not pass the test because he did not study. We have a claim: Jon will not pass the test; based on evidence: he did not study. The claim is probable because it is based on a reasonable assumption: people need to study the material in order to pass a test. However, that assumption is not an absolute certainty; a particular individual may know the material being covered on a particular test so well that he doesn’t need to study for it, or he may get lucky and the test will only cover that which he happened to know without studying, or any number of other scenarios. This is the realm of rhetoric: the probable. Based on what we know of human nature and from past experience (our own and that of history), we can have reasonable ideas about what will happen in the future, but we can never predict it with certainty.

The next chapter will discuss some of the major kinds of evidence writers use to develop a message.

**Writer**

We often don’t think about this point of the triangle, simply because it seems obvious. I’m the writer, so what’s to think about? I already know myself! However, if we are to serve our readers, rather than ourselves, we need to give careful consideration to what we bring to each specific writing task, what our prejudices and assumptions are, and how we present ourselves in the crafting of our message.

Most importantly, we cannot deceive our readers by pretending to be something we are not: if you aren’t an expert, don’t imply that you are; if you don’t have compassion toward a group of people, don’t pretend that you do; never suggest that you believe something you don’t. Your character is how you will be judged, and if readers think they cannot trust you, they won’t read and attend to your work, no matter how otherwise excellent.

However, we do make choices about what parts of ourselves we reveal in any given piece of writing. A brain surgeon will have expert knowledge of the brain which he can describe in precise scientific terms, but he will use certain ways of conveying his knowledge to a middle school biology class, perhaps by telling stories and creating interesting analogies, that he probably wouldn’t use at a professional conference, where he dispassionately and precisely presents several case studies to experts like himself. We adjust to our audiences automatically; we speak somewhat differently to authority figures than to peers, to strangers than to friends, to adults than to children, to experts than to non-experts. There is no reason for this to be deceitful as long as we are being honest in who we are and what we believe. Don’t cater to your audience’s beliefs, or make yourself into someone you are not in an attempt to impress them, but seek to win them to listen and be persuaded.

Some helpful considerations in thinking about who we are in relation to a writing task: am I an expert addressing experts? an expert addressing lay people? a layperson addressing experts? a layperson addressing other lay people? Am I older or younger than most of my audience, or an
age group peer? Do I have a position of authority over my audience, or am I under their authority? Do I actually know many of my audience members or are they mostly strangers? What values and experiences do I have in common with my audience? Thinking about these issues can help us to decide what kinds of examples to use, what tone is most appropriate, how explicitly persuasive we need to be, and so on.

**Conclusion**

“Context is everything,” a professor of mine used to say whenever disputes arose about the effectiveness of any piece of writing. If we don’t understand who our readers are, if we write without clear purpose, if we develop a message with random thoughts, if we come across as arrogant or obsequious – we are not serving our readers and helping them to come to a fuller understanding of truth. Understanding our purpose, our readers, our message, and ourselves is always the beginning point of the writing process.
Chapter III: Pre-Writing to the Initial Draft

“The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge [. . .]” (Prov. 15:14a NASB).

We begin writing with an idea in mind, but it is fatal to hold to that idea so strongly that we think we can just “write it up” and be done. Recently I was asked to write a review of a book, On Moral Fiction by John Gardner, that I’d read several times and felt that I knew pretty well. It was tempting to leap directly into the writing and get it done quickly, telling my readers what I already knew – or thought I knew. But years of experience warned me to take my time, so I began re-reading it, taking comprehensive notes. Keeping my audience in mind (mostly college-educated Christians who are interested in the arts and intellectual life), I developed a purpose for the review – to convince them of the value of the book, though written by a non-Christian, in understanding why and how art is a moral undertaking. Immediately I began to notice ideas I’d only skimmed by before: how exactly had Gardner defined morality and how did his definition fit with biblical morality? Remarks that he made about a particular type of literary criticism sent me researching in order to articulate why I disagreed with him, and I looked up examples he gave that I knew little about in order to address them. I discovered that the structure of the book was more elaborate than I’d realized, and had to decide how to present his ideas to my audience – according to his own structuring of them or in a different order that might be more helpful for my purpose. While my idea of the book’s content and value didn’t change in this process – though it could have – I found that I understood it at a deeper level than I had before, and was able to offer my readers a much better review than if I’d just written off the top of my head from previous knowledge.

Planning, researching, beginning to organize: these are essential to the creation of a product which has integrity and is worthy of reading. And every step of the way must be guided by the question “How can I serve my readers with this work; what is it that will help them understand my message?”

Formulating a Question to Explore

A writer might have a good idea of his opinion about the issue he has chosen to explore in an essay. However, it is always wiser to formulate a question to pursue, rather than to begin prewriting with a controlling idea already firmly in mind. If you begin with the latter, it is likely you will overlook information and ideas that would shape your thinking and add depth to your essay, as well as overlooking important arguments of opposing viewpoints that need to be acknowledged as legitimate or effectively refuted.

Therefore, writers often begin, explicitly or implicitly, with a question in mind rather than an assertion, and their prewriting is a search for information that will help to answer the question. For less experienced writers, formulating an explicit question that is specific and open-ended will help to guide your prewriting and also keep you from closing off possibly helpful information.

Here are some examples of helpfully articulated questions:

Is marriage, defined as a union between one man and one woman, a necessary institution for social cohesion?
Do strict gun control laws create a safer society?
Will a college education guarantee greater success in the graduate’s economic and social life?
Will federal tax cuts stimulate growth in the national economy?

Note how each of these questions is phrased without suggesting a particular answer; this reminds the writer that he is seeking all the information he can find on the subject, not just information to support an already-held view. The answer that he formulates to this question will become the controlling idea of his essay.

Gathering Information
Writing is the exploration of questions, the seeking of answers, the articulation of conclusions: it is a journey to truth. Once a writer has an idea in mind and questions about that idea, he begins to gather information to find out all he can in order to balance varying perspectives and determine the truth of the matter that he can present to his readers. During this process, he is open to being changed by his research; even if he is certain of his conclusion, there may be much to learn about why that conclusion is true and the ways that others have argued for and against it, and he may find his stance softened or strengthened by what he learns. Here are the most common ways that writers go about gathering information.

Researching
Research includes library work, but it is also interviewing, doing studies, taking surveys, and so on. Documentation handbooks such as *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* cover ways of going about research, which is beyond the purview of this text. Keep in mind that all information you find is not of the same value: Janie’s homepage on the web is less likely to be a credible source – or at least seen as such by your readers – than a peer-reviewed journal article. Access to information is seemingly unlimited today, but that means that much of what we find is worth about as much as the two-second internet search it takes to find it. Learn to seek out the credentials of authors, whether these are professional degrees or extensive experience. Check out websites thoroughly before relying on them for good information. Be cautious of statistics, as they are easily skewed, and be sure you carefully craft any original research you do so that it results in helpful, accurate, and relevant information. Pay attention to the biases and values of writers and publications and keep them in mind as you evaluate their work; we are all biased, but the writer of integrity does not let his bias so cloud his judgment that he is not able to see when even those with whom he disagrees are right – and he treats those others as rational men of good will unless it is provable that they are not.

Brainstorming and Clustering
Brainstorming is often an excellent first step in gathering information; it is simply a means of accessing the information you already have and suggesting questions that will need to be answered through research. Simply begin listing, in no particular order and without censoring your ideas, all that comes to mind on your subject. If I were thinking of writing an essay about the value of marriage, I might come up with a beginning list something like this:

- purpose of marriage
- fulfill Great Commission
what Scripture says (Genesis, I Cor, I Peter, where else?)

selflessness – what do I give?

what the world says (need to find current commentary)

companionship

represent Christ and church

the place of love

raise godly children

benefits – financial, health, safety (what does Gallagher say?)

eros – sexual fulfillment

phileo

community

agape

selfishness – what do I get?

definition of love: secular, biblical

Once you’ve listed everything you can think of, begin placing the ideas in logical groups; this can be the beginning of an outline. The above list suggests a comparison between secular and biblical ideas, for example. Or, if you need to narrow a broad subject, it can suggest where you have the most information to work with or in what aspect of the subject your interest lies; this list suggests a somewhat stronger interest in biblical ideas of marriage, which may suggest the writer should focus attention on these, depending on the audience and purpose of the work.

Clustering is visual brainstorming, and groups ideas as they are listed. Write your topic inside a circle in the middle of a page, then draw lines to the different information and ideas as you think of them; these secondary ideas will spark more until you have a chart that looks something like this:

Brainstorming with friends can be helpful; businesses often use this technique in seeking ideas for advertising campaigns or new products or in finding innovative ways to save money, motivate employees, and so on. Television shows hire groups of writers who brainstorm ideas for each episode. Almost any kind of group project begins with some form of brainstorming.
Freewriting
Many people like to freewrite to gather information and ideas. Sometimes you might be told in a class to write without stopping for a certain period of time on any subject at all. But when you know the subject of your writing, you can do a focused freewrite to help you think about it. I often begin with a question or statement about my subject, such as “why is marriage important?” Then I simply begin to write, in paragraph form, without thinking too much about it. I don’t stop for at least ten minutes; if I can’t think of anything more before the time is up, I write “can’t think, can’t think, can’t think” until my mind rebels and comes up with a new idea. The point of this exercise is to access knowledge that is not right at the mind’s surface; by forcing yourself to keep writing, you force the mind to deliver more than you realized it knew. You may even surprise yourself with a few sentences that can actually be used in your essay, and the ten-minute freewrite may turn into an hour or two drafting session.

Heuristics
Heuristics are sets of related questions that can help us to find and consider information about a subject; you can find many such sets online by using the search term “heuristics for writing.” The journalist’s questions are a common set: who, when, where, why, and how? These questions might lead to answers like this (among many other possibilities you will think of) for the subject of marriage: who? God created and instituted marriage for one man and one woman; when? He did this when He created man and woman in His image in the Garden of Eden; where? marriage has been a part of every culture in the world; why? marriage supplies a strong community for raising godly children who will love God and their neighbors; how? marriage happens when a man and a woman make a vow before God and their friends and neighbors to be loyal to one another for life. Each of these statements, of course, can be expounded on.

Another set of questions is similar but takes a little different perspective:
- what does your subject look like;
- what can it be compared to;
- what does it remind you of;
- what purpose does it serve?
I might answer these in this way: marriage looks like my parents after 67 years, their love and loyalty as my dad’s health declined; it can be compared to Christ and the church because the husband both leads and serves his wife and the wife both serves and complements her husband, and both work together for a common goal; marriage reminds me of sacrifice and loyalty; its purpose is to glorify God by showing a picture of His relationship to us and to create a place for raising children to know Him.

A third set:
- what is the context of your subject (who and what are associated with it);
- what is it in time (what is its history, has it changed over time, what are causes and effects of it);
- how can the subject be classified (what is it similar to)?
The first question of this set would take me again to God’s instituting marriage for one man and one woman; the second might take me in a new direction as I think about marriage customs in different places and times, and how our understanding of marriage in the U.S. has changed over
the last half-century to where there is a debate over who can be married; the third brings to mind how marriage is arranged similarly to and differently from other binding agreements, such as business contracts or military hierarchies.

In this process of gathering information and ideas, it’s good not to constrain yourself too much. Use the context of your writing situation to help guide you, but let yourself stray beyond its seeming boundaries somewhat; you never know what insights you might find where you least expect them. Let’s say I were writing an essay on marriage for young people in my church in order to help them understand its biblical roots and significance. I would not want to limit myself initially to solely Christian sources, because I might find interesting similarities to the biblical model in the concepts of marriage held by other religions and non-Western cultures; these similarities might help me make the case that marriage has always and everywhere been a means of ensuring the safety of children – a case I might not even have considered if I had limited myself too severely in my beginning research.

**Kinds of Evidence**
What kinds of evidence should you be looking for as you gather information on your topic in these various ways? Many kinds can be used to develop a message by supporting its controlling idea. Keep in mind that you are not looking exclusively for facts to give absolute proofs, but you are seeking demonstrations of the probability of your claims. The following list is not comprehensive, but gives the most common kinds of information to be looking for in your prewriting.

**Factual Evidence**
This includes simple facts like dates and places and names, most of which you don’t need to point to a specific source for, as they should be easily confirmed. Facts are generally used in developing an argument as a foundation for the other methods of development. They are a starting point, but only hold value as they are interpreted within a framework of values and presuppositions.

We generally include statistics as factual evidence, but they are only as good as the study or survey or poll that obtains them, and you must cite your source for them. Never trust statistics just because they are presented as fact; always seek out their origin and attend to the way in which they have been interpreted. Try to find out who did the study or survey, what method they used, what questions they asked, etc. Graphs and charts can be manipulated to look like they are conveying one message when the numbers actually convey another, so study – and create – them carefully.

**Expert Testimony**
Expert testimony is the opinion of someone who is an expert in the field of study you are exploring. While anyone may have an opinion about a topic, it is informed opinion that matters, and experts have the most information to work from. Many articles and books are written by experts sharing their knowledge, and these offer a fruitful supply of material for learning about a subject and supporting our own opinion when we write about it. Interviews with experts can add to our understanding, as well, and allow for questions and clarifications.
People may become experts by a course of study – through university studies or technical schools or apprenticeships, for example. However, people can become experts in an area without having an academic degree or a technical license – and sometimes people with degrees may be so specialized or so biased, emotionally or ideologically, that their information is not accurate or helpful. Therefore, look at more than credentials; look at articles and books written, at whether the person is cited by other experts, and so on. Journalists often make themselves experts in a field which they write about for many years, but do explore their qualifications; they should usually show their expertise through their own familiarity with and citing of expert sources. The same goes for lay people who have made themselves experts in an area because of some personal experience or interest.

Some well-intentioned teachers may have told you that “bias” automatically disqualifies a source from being credible. However, no one is unbiased, and the reason most people write about a subject is because they care passionately about it and wish to convey their understanding of the truth of it. And who would want to read an article or book written by someone who doesn’t care about his subject? It is not important to be unbiased; it is important to a) recognize our own bias, b) treat those with whom we disagree fairly and respectfully, listen to their arguments, and acknowledge when they are right, and c) learn to recognize the bias of others. Therefore, when you are seeking expert testimony with which to develop your essay, look for authors who explain both sides of an issue, who carefully and respectfully refute their opponents with logic and evidence, who are willing to concede when their opponents are right – in short, who hold their opinions with both confidence and humility and treat their opponents as intelligent men of good will.

And be willing to have your own first opinions changed by your research, the point of which is to make you better informed and therefore to have opinions that matter beyond their emotional subjectivity.

Examples
Examples provide specific illustrations of a point and therefore draw the readers’ interest. Examples in themselves don’t prove anything; however, because they are concrete illustrations, they can help to make a concept or argument more understandable and cause us to care about it more deeply. For example, I can define and explain the concept of sacrificial love, but when I give examples of my husband’s kindness to rise out of our warm bed at 2:00 a.m. on a freezing Kansas night to get me a blanket, and then get up early the next morning to scrape the car windows, warm the car up, and shovel the driveway, it is much more compelling.

Examples are not always stories, of course. If I were discussing digital technology, I might use examples of cell phones, cameras, and clocks; if I were writing about television advertising, I might list the kinds of advertisements aired during a particular time slot or type of show; if I were explaining linguistic evolution, I would give examples of grammar and vocabulary differences over time; and so on.

When selecting examples, it’s important to make sure they are relevant to the subject being discussed. If I live in the suburb of a large city, and I am arguing that we should not bring in a factory because of its potential effects on the local ambience and population, examples of the
effects of bringing WalMart into small rural towns will not be relevant to the discussion; factories and stores, suburbs and rural towns, are vastly different.

Examples also must be representative of the idea being argued. I have always remembered an essay in which a student argued that handguns should be banned, using as his only example an account of a store owner being robbed at gunpoint but taking his own gun from the safe and killing the robber. The student’s argument was that if handguns had been banned, the owner would not have had a gun and “no one would have died” – completely overlooking the fact that the armed robber (criminals don’t tend to obey gun control laws) might well have killed the owner, or either the owner or the robber might have been killed in some other way. Many examples are available that would serve to support an argument for a handgun ban, but this one undermines the student’s entire point and may even drive readers to the opposite view.

As well, examples need to resonate with the readers. Examples of cultural interests drawn solely from deep South Nascar country won’t be very persuasive to readers from Boston or Los Angeles. The principle you are explaining may well be true for both demographics, but your particular readers must find the examples you offer interesting and familiar. Examples must also be typical; it’s possible to find at least one example that seems to prove anything, but if readers see an example as anomalous, out of the ordinary, they won’t be persuaded by it. No doubt there are thieves who get away with their crime and seem to be thriving and happy, but such examples don’t disprove the Biblical teaching that sin is destructive.

Anecdotes (Narration)
Anecdotes are stories that help readers understand or respond to a subject. Readers love anecdotes because we are all story-tellers; and we are story-tellers because we live in the story written by our Creator and Redeemer. Our Scriptures, in fact, do not open with a statement of doctrine; they open with a story: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Like examples, anecdotes don’t prove anything by themselves, but they can help readers to understand and feel the importance of your subject, and they serve as evidence of how situations have occurred in the past and therefore might occur in the future.

In the gun control essay referred to under the section on examples, the example of the store owner and the robber is also an anecdote (but examples are not always anecdotes, as noted). An anecdote may be a true story drawn from the writer’s experience and observation or from the writer’s research, or it may be a hypothetical story created to make a point. Hypothetical anecdotes have the advantage of not putting a negative light on real people, but they can also be less compelling than real stories, as readers will know the details have been crafted and may suspect they are not necessarily representative of real life. Composite anecdotes can sometimes be effective – combining elements of several real stories into one, fictionalizing many of the factual data such as names and dates and places. Do, however, always let your readers know if your anecdote is hypothetical or a composite, as they will feel cheated if it appears to be true and they find out later that it isn’t.

In choosing anecdotes, as with examples, make sure they are relevant and representative. No matter how interesting a story may be in itself, if it forms part of an essay and does not clearly support the essay’s message, readers will be annoyed and distracted. Once you have an
appropriate story, tell it well, developing each element to draw the reader into its world and thus want to know more about your subject. I could use the examples above about my husband’s sacrificial love as just examples, giving no more information than I did. But if I wanted to turn one of them into an anecdote, I would set the scene of a cold Kansas winter with the snow heaped up outside and the thermostat set low to save energy, the air nipping at my nose as I shiver under the inadequate covers, my tossing and turning, his sleepy question – “Are you cold?” – his rising without protest, rooting the warm down quilt out of its storage box and spreading it across the bed, his cold feet as he snuggles up to me to get warm again, the lovely sense of feeling finally comfortable and drifting at last to sleep. The details are what will make an anecdote come alive for your readers and will elicit the emotions you wish them to feel while also giving helpful information about your subject.

**Analogy**

Analogy is a form of comparison that helps readers understand a new, less familiar concept by comparing it to one that is more well known. For example, I often use the analogy of a road map – something all of us are familiar with – to discuss the use of transitions in writing – a concept less familiar to young writers. Taking a road trip doesn’t have an immediately obvious similarity to writing an essay, but both are intended to take us somewhere: I get in the car to go visit my mother in Texas, and I pick up an essay to follow a train of thought to a logical conclusion. Without a map, I will likely get lost on the road; the map tells me what highway I should be on and which one I need to change to and where to find it; it tells me which direction to turn when I come to a crossroad, if an interesting side road will take me to my destination, and so on. In an essay, transitions similarly function as a guide, a map, to the writer’s thought: they tell us when the writer is beginning a new angle on his subject, when he is setting up an example or a contrast, when he is returning to an earlier idea to deepen its significance, what the purpose of a seeming digression is, and so on. Just as I’d get lost on a road trip without a map, I’m likely to get lost in an essay without transitions.

Analogy can influence a discussion because of the images they create: if I liken the internet to a highway, I create a different concept in my readers’ minds than if I liken it to a community. This is why we want to be thoughtful in choosing analogies, looking for ones that will help to make our point clear. Like examples and anecdotes, analogies don’t prove anything in themselves; they are rather meant as helpful explanation of concepts.

**Definition**

Many terms and concepts we use admit a variety of definitions: what exactly is “freedom,” for example, or “justice,” or even “love”? To refer to such concepts and assume their meaning may cause confusion or even be deceptive. At other times, writers may need to refer to concepts or objects, or use professional or technical terms, that are unfamiliar to their readers. In these instances, definition is necessary.

Avoid ever using a simple dictionary definition (“according to Webster’s”) – if that is all your readers need, let them look it up for themselves if it’s unfamiliar. Rather, develop your own definition, specific to your context and usage, that will ensure that your readers understand the same thing that you do by the term you use.
The traditional definition format is the three part “term + class + differentiation”: for example, “sacrificial love [term] is an act of the will [class] which places the welfare of the beloved above the lover’s own [differentiation].” This type of definition may in itself be sufficient for a technical term, but in most cases you will need something more in order to be sure your readers fully grasp your meaning and understand the term in your way each time you refer to it. I might use the above definition of sacrificial love in an essay on marriage, for example, but I would probably extend that definition in several ways: I might explain how this kind of love does not rely on affection or erotic attraction and so is consistent even in the most difficult times; I might give examples of how such love is displayed in marriage; perhaps I would use Scriptural explanations and examples, if these would be appropriate for my audience; and so on.

Creating a Controlling Idea
The point of gathering information is to determine first of all what the main point – the controlling idea – of the essay is going to be. Even if you begin a project reasonably sure of your position, and your research confirms that position, crafting the actual controlling idea clearly, both for your reader’s sake and to help you in developing the essay, is a vital step in the prewriting and drafting process. Having developed an effective question to explore can help in this process: your controlling idea should be the answer to your initial question.

Definition of Controlling Idea
The controlling idea is the one main idea you want your reader to remember after finishing your essay. A reader can’t keep in mind several ideas very well; but he can remember one main thing easily, if you make a good case for it and even if he doesn’t remember all the supporting points you used. The supporting points of an essay ought to be subsumed under one main idea which controls the content of the essay: everything in the essay supports it in some way which is clearly evident to the reader. Experienced writers often imply a controlling idea rather than stating it outright, but students of writing do well to formulate a controlling idea and state it explicitly, usually early in the essay, to help both themselves and their readers stay on track.

What a Controlling Idea is NOT
Let’s start by looking at the kinds of statements that are not controlling ideas:

A) a subject: The controlling idea is “music.”

“Music” is a huge subject, on which thousands of volumes have been written. The word gives you no idea whatsoever of the actual topic of the essay – “what about music?” the frustrated reader would ask.

B) a topic: The controlling idea is “the hymns we sing.”

“The hymns we sing” is a little better than “music.” At least it narrows that subject to a smaller topic, what kind of music. But it is still inadequate: many books and articles have been written about hymns, and the phrase gives not the least hint as to what the essay says about hymns.
C) a question: “How important are the hymns we sing in worship services?”

This question implies a still somewhat narrower topic – the importance of the hymns we sing – but it doesn’t function as a controlling idea because it still doesn’t tell us what the essay says about the importance of hymns. It may be the question the writer is exploring in the essay, but it still only suggests a topic.

Notice: The problem in each case above is that the word or phrase or question doesn’t tell us anything about the topic of the essay. A controlling idea, to control the piece of writing, has to tell us about the essay’s topic.

What a Controlling Idea IS
A controlling idea is an assertion about a topic: “The hymns we sing influence our theology more than the sermons we hear, because we listen to them less carefully.”

This statement finally tells the reader what the essay says about the importance of the hymns we sing. It also suggests the sub-topics that need to be addressed: why do we listen to hymns less carefully than sermons? In what ways do hymns influence our theology? How do they influence us if we are paying less attention to them? The reader of this essay will be looking for the answers to these questions; the writer will realize that he needs to answer them.

Keep in mind that the more specific your controlling idea is, the more effectively it will guide you as you write. If, in the example, the writer merely wrote, “The hymns we sing influence our theology more than the sermons we hear,” it would be a reasonable controlling idea, but would leave the reader still somewhat dissatisfied. By adding the reason why, the writer gives a clearer, fuller idea of what to expect, of what the essay is about.

Persuasive Controlling Ideas: Claims
A controlling idea may be expository (informative or expressive), or persuasive; we call a persuasive controlling idea a “claim.” Persuasive claims may be claims of value (aesthetics or morals and ethics) or of policy (the best course of action).

There are other kinds of claims:

* claim of fact: That is a maple tree, not an elm.

* claim of preference: Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla.

These kinds of claims do not generally lend themselves to the creation of effective essays, because there’s usually not enough to say about them. Fact claims, of course, may be used to support persuasive claims. Preference claims may form the basis of interesting reflective essays, but they are not arguable and thus are only occasionally helpful in developing persuasive or expository claims.
Following are some examples of expository controlling ideas:

* Informative: The U.S. entered World War II only after being provoked by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

* Informative: Diesel and gasoline engines have several significant differences that affect their fuel efficiency.

* Expressive: My mother’s tenacity in adversity has shown me how to live through difficult times.

And here are some examples of persuasive controlling ideas, or claims:

* Value Claims:
  * “UP” is an excellent film because it delivers a profoundly moral message through a finely crafted animated comedy.

  * Watching R-rated films is morally wrong because they use techniques that tempt viewers to excuse sin.

* Policy Claims:
  * We need to limit medical liability in order to safeguard doctors and control insurance costs.

  * We should change the college’s curfew policy so students have more freedom in choosing late-night activities.

Organizing
Of course information needs to be organized in some logical manner to be understandable and helpful for readers. We can’t just write down ideas as they occur to us; we need to make them accessible to others. There is, however, no simple formula for organizing information. The 5-paragraph essay that is often taught is good for teaching beginning writers that structure is important, and it can be a quick way of organizing thoughts for an exam, but writers in the real world don’t fill in formulas; they seek the best organization to fulfill their purpose and meet the needs of their audience.

The controlling idea will provide the first and most important key to a logical structure, as it contains within it the idea which controls the information needed. Some of the questions we ask as we consider structuring the information we have gathered to support the controlling idea: what background information do my readers need? Do I need to define and explain any of my basic concepts for my readers? What are logical connections I need to make for my readers—chronological, spatial, causal, level of importance, and so on? Each essay within its context will hold a logical form, which it is our responsibility to seek and present.
Classical Structure
While we do not want to depend on superficial formulas into which we can pour content thoughtlessly, but rather let the content we discover suggest the organization we use, certain features are common to most rhetorical contexts and provide a place to begin thinking about organization. **Introductions** and **conclusions** by definition begin and end essays, of course, but there are many ways of developing and organizing these. **Confirmation** is the support of the writer’s position; **refutation** is showing the flaws and errors of other positions. In some very specific contexts, both confirmation and refutation may not be needed; most of the time, both are, but they can be in either order or interspersed with each other, and they also may be developed and organized in a variety of ways. (Much of the following discussion is based on the work of Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors in their standard text *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student.*)

**Introduction**
An introduction should always give a clear indication of the essay’s topic, and it needs to draw the audience’s interest while also gaining their good will. The introduction should establish the writer’s authority to write on the subject, and any background or contextual information needed belongs here. Although in some contexts a later statement is more effective, the introduction often states or implies the controlling idea.

While the introduction need not immediately give away the writer’s viewpoint, it does need to give its readers a clear indication of its subject matter. A colleague once commented on a student essay about lessons he learned from a motorcycle accident – but he began with a paragraph about the invention of the wheel, and took half the essay to get to the real subject of his accident. Most readers don’t have patience with such a tactic; the opening sentences should tell them exactly what the essay is about. Obviously, if you begin reading about the invention of the wheel, you may be frustrated and annoyed at finding that the essay is about something else.

Gaining a reader’s good will has to do with the tone of the essay: if it sounds condescending or angry or vitriolic, readers may not stay around to listen to its substance. This is not to say that sarcasm and wit are never to be used, but it is a caution to consider their use very carefully in relation to the audience and purpose of the essay. Writers of regular columns, for example, often have more freedom to assume their readers will understand a tone that might be offensive to those unfamiliar with it. When a writer shows respect for his readers – and especially for those who disagree with him – he is more likely to gain a hearing and have the opportunity to do more than merely preach to the choir.

Readers won’t trust writers who have no authority to write on a subject, and ignorance will show itself quickly. The introduction of an essay should show knowledge in some way – by using well-known facts and statistics, or giving a salient example, or referencing personal experience or research. The writer doesn’t “announce” his credentials (“I am a physicist with 30 years of experience . . .”), but they are evidenced in his knowledge. If context and/or background information are needed for the audience to follow an argument, providing this also shows knowledge of the subject.
Most essays will provide a statement, clear suggestion, or implication of the controlling idea in the introduction. This allows the audience to read the information in light of what claim it is meant to support, evaluating its effectiveness and helpfulness as they go. Occasionally a writer chooses to build his case first, only toward the end revealing explicitly the controlling idea; this is usually the case with an audience who might be hostile to his views and whom he hopes to win by the force of the argument as it unfolds. However, it takes great skill to do this without merely frustrating readers. Sometimes a writer might build the opposing argument to his own before revealing his disagreement with it and then building his own case. This is not uncommon, and as readers ourselves we need to be alert to it, not assuming that the first assertion made in an essay is by necessity the writer’s controlling idea.

These objectives of an effective introduction may be met in many different ways. The traditional “funnel” introduction is common: start with a general statement about your subject (but not too general) and narrow it down to your specific controlling idea. However, beginning with an anecdote or example can draw readers’ interest by putting a human face to the subject; the use of unusual facts or statistics can startle readers into wanting to know more; opening with historical or contextual information might intrigue readers to follow the subject into its current manifestations; a direct, bald statement of your position might cause readers to ask why you hold it and read on to find out; and we’ve discussed above beginning with the argument you intend to refute. So it is inadequate just to say when planning, “I need an introduction”; rather, we need to consider the context of the essay, especially the audience, and seek an introduction that will draw them in and keep them reading.

**Refutation**

A strictly informative essay will not use refutation and confirmation, as such, though it may need to show more than one side of an issue; if you are giving information about gun control laws, for example, you may need to give some history by explaining what both proponents and opponents have advocated and the results of their arguments. If you are not, however, trying to persuade your readers for or against such laws, you will not be concerned with refuting or supporting either set of arguments; you will present them as fairly and without bias as you can.

But persuasive essays will almost always require the refutation of opposing arguments. Students often ask why they can’t just give their own opinion and support it, thinking perhaps that it is more persuasive to focus on only one side of an argument. However, the writer who does this appears to either lack knowledge or understanding of the debate, which undermines his authority to speak on it.

In the prewriting stage, it is vitally important to learn and understand what others say about the subject in order to present their arguments justly, find any common ground to build on, concede where the opposing arguments are correct, and refute those which are weak or faulty. When we show that we have listened honestly to our opponents, they are far more likely to listen honestly to us. It is often helpful to argue for the opposite view at this stage in order to gain a good knowledge and understanding of it. Then you will be prepared to consider not only the opposing view but the objections your opponents might have to your own.
Confirmation
Obviously writers will give a clear and excellent support of their own opinion, using the kinds of evidence and support discussed above as suggested by the context of the essay. It is never enough to refute opposing views; if your own view appears weak or unsupported, you will only leave readers confused – or they will simply dismiss all you have said. Building your own case carefully, thoroughly, and logically will give readers food for thought, at least, and may win them over even as they read.

Which comes first, confirmation or refutation? Consider audience commitment to opposing arguments – if this is strong, you might want to do the confirmation first rather than start out by reminding them of what they already believe. Or if the opposing arguments are weak, an immediate strong argument for your position may make them look even weaker. But the general mode is to refute first, then end strongly with your own proof. This provides a positive end to your essay – here’s what’s right with my opinion; instead of a negative end – here’s what’s wrong with someone else’s.

Whichever you choose to do first, of course there are still many decisions to be made concerning the organization within each section. Some of the possibilities to consider: least important points to most important; weakest to strongest; general to particular; familiar to unknown; accepted to unusual or controversial. As always, consider your audience’s views, knowledge, and needs in determining what structure will be most effective in winning them to believe and act on what you are as certain as you can be is true.

Conclusion
The main purpose of a conclusion is to leave your readers understanding the significance of your controlling idea and, ideally, embracing and acting on it. When readers come to the end of an essay, they have one question in mind that your conclusion must answer: “So what?” Why is this an important subject? What difference does it make what I believe about it? Why should I act on what you have just told me? Just as it’s wise to start an essay by developing the good will of your reader, it’s wise to conclude the essay on a note that is respectful and winsome, one which will help them to believe that your conclusion is in their best interest, not just your own.

As introductions, conclusions can take many forms. Although summarizing what has already been said is common among inexperienced writers, it is only necessary if the argument has been very long or very complex; otherwise, it can seem rather condescending to suggest that readers can’t recall a few well-made points. Instead, develop the significance of your controlling idea through a final example or anecdote; a look at the consequences of a wrong decision or the long-term implications of the right one; perhaps a call to action.

As Corbett and Connors write, “Almost no rule about arrangement is inflexible.” The controlling idea of an essay, if well formulated, will guide arrangement almost automatically when carefully considered in light of the audience and purpose; in other words, you will see what needs to be said and in what order once you understand who your audience is and what exactly you wish to communicate to them for what reason.
Some Helpful Modes of Thought Development

While the following modes of development are sometimes used to organize entire essays (especially the problem/solution mode), they are more frequently found as ways to develop supporting points within an essay, in a paragraph or a section.

Comparison/Contrast
We compare and/or contrast two similar things to help our readers see important similarities and/or distinctions. If I am writing an essay on why Christian students should consider Christian colleges, part of my strategy will almost certainly be to compare and contrast secular and Christian colleges: what are the similarities between, say, state colleges and private Christian colleges which might make them both appear to be good choices, but what are the differences between them that would make a Christian college a better fit for at least some of my readers? Often either the similarities or the differences are most important and you will focus on comparison or on contrast as needed.

Comparisons and contrasts can be structured in one of two ways. If I’ve found four differences I wish to describe to my readers about state colleges and private Christian colleges, I could structure the contrast point by point: describe the social life of both colleges, describe the academic choices available at both, the religious support and challenges at both, and the rules and behavior expectations of both. Or I could structure the contrast subject by subject, describing all four areas for state colleges, then describing all four areas for private Christian colleges, being sure to keep the points in the same order for each. The more points you have to make about each subject, the easier it will be to structure them point by point; shorter comparisons can more easily be done subject by subject. Choose the one that best suits the overall purpose of your essay, how the comparison or contrast fits within the structure of the whole, and which will be easiest for your readers to follow.

You’ve no doubt heard someone say “that’s apples and oranges” in response to a comparison. Always be sure your comparisons are helpful and sensible: comparing the manufacturing process of grape juice to the process of harvesting pineapples probably won’t net significant enough information to interest anyone.

Description
Often an essay benefits from physical description of a place, object, or person so that readers can visualize details helpful in understanding the writer’s overall point. Description can bring an essay alive and make readers both understand and respond to your point more fully. We generally think of descriptive details as having to do with the five senses: sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste. Description can be used in the service of most of the other methods of development given here; the question is simply how much detail your readers need in each particular instance where description will be helpful.

Cause/Effect
Writers often need to explain the causes of certain effects or the effects of certain causes; when we can relate these properly to each other, then we can evaluate actions more wisely. Problems can arise in this method of development when we equate causation with correlation: merely because one action follows another, we can’t claim that the first caused the second; they may be
unrelated. You may wear your favorite sweater and your team wins the championship game but – fun as such superstitions are – your sweater has of course no influence on the game’s outcome whatsoever. Many actions are less obviously only correlated and not cause/effect, and it’s incumbent on us to study the subject well enough to tell the difference: certain economic outcomes may or may not be the effect of certain government policies, for example. When causes can be many and complex, we need to be careful not to oversimplify the issues, nor to claim that only one specific cause exists.

Problem/Solution
Problems and solutions are closely related to causes and effects: we can’t offer a solution to a problem unless we know what has caused it, and what other effects a solution might have besides the one we are desiring. If the causes of a problem are complex, the solution will not be simple; and addressing symptoms of a problem instead of its root causes is a superficial fix that won’t have the long-term results we hope for.

When explaining a problem, we need to explain not only what it is – say, too many crimes involving guns – but also why it is a problem. What are the consequences of this problem, how is it harming people, how widespread is it, and so on: these are questions we need to ask ourselves and lay out clearly for our readers. We need to explore possible causes (see “cause/effect” above) and show that these really are causes.

Sometimes explaining a problem in order to bring attention to it is an essay’s only purpose, but more often an essay outlining a problem also offers one or more possible solutions. These solutions need to be clearly explained, and we need to show how they will solve the problem: it is fine to argue for a ban on handguns, for example, but this offered as a solution to gun crime demands the question of why criminals would then be without guns – law-abiding citizens might obey the ban, but criminals by definition operate outside the law. You will need to show, then, through evidence and logic, how such a ban would actually stop criminals from using guns in the commission of their crimes.

Another important part of offering solutions is to consider their long-term and possibly unintended consequences. A particular policy might seem good in the immediate present, but when followed for a longer period may create new problems that are worse than the one it was meant to solve. We do well to remember that we live in a fallen world, and there are no perfect solutions to any problems. We cannot rid the world of sin; we can only hope to alleviate its effects as much and as wisely as possible.

These modes of development offer ways of thinking about your topic as well as ways of organizing parts or even the whole. Even if you are using one as a primary mode of development, you will still need to consider how to organize each section and paragraph within that whole.

The Initial Draft
A draft is simply a document that has an introduction, body, and conclusion, and which is beginning to communicate your message. Prewriting generally blends naturally into creating the initial draft of your work. Some professional writers call this the “zero” draft, because it’s at this
point that the real work of creating a finished product begins. There is no need to strive for perfection at this stage; your job now is to get the idea down in a reasonably thoughtful fashion. Once you have created a controlling idea, found evidence to support it, arranged that evidence in a logical fashion, and crafted an introduction and conclusion, it’s time to step back and see how you can now take this fledgling essay and bring it to maturity.
Chapter IV: Revising

“The lips of the wise spread knowledge [. . .]” (Prov. 15:7 NASB).

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on a comparison of the concept of ethos in classical and modern rhetoric. With every chapter draft that I took to my director, he would begin reading, pick up a pen, and cross through my first several paragraphs. “Your chapter begins here,” he would remark as he continued reading. When I would look back over it, I would find that indeed those paragraphs were fluff, thinking on paper, inessential for my intended audience of college English teachers.

I had written a brief outline for the project, intending to discuss three major points in each chapter (the chapters themselves were arranged chronologically): how ethos was defined, how rhetoric was defined, and the aims of rhetoric as seen by rhetoricians of each period, in that order. Then I followed that outline slavishly until I had drafted three of the five chapters, at which point I finally admitted that they didn’t make logical sense; the order was not working effectively. So I restructured all three chapters with a more logical order, and was rewarded by all of my professors on the doctoral committee complimenting me on the dissertation’s clarity of thought.

To revise means to re-envision: to look at a draft not as a piece labored over and ready to do its work, but one that is only a beginning, one which will almost certainly need careful reworking to most effectively serve its readers.

Global Concerns
Revision has to do with the global concerns of writing: does the essay follow the assigned task, and do its controlling idea, development and support, structure, introduction, and conclusion effectively meet the readers’ needs? Of course, some revision will occur during the drafting stage, and editing during the revising stage. Remember that these various stages occur not in an absolute linear pattern, but they overlap and we move back and forth between them. We distinguish them in discussion to help us remember that “revision” doesn’t mean merely proofreading for comma errors and considering the work complete. It’s always a good idea to get away from your writing for as long as reasonably possible before beginning the revision process: you will see your work much more clearly after a rest from it.

As you work through this revision process, keep in mind the information in the previous chapter as a guide in thinking through possible changes.

Controlling Idea
The first thing to consider about an initial draft is the controlling idea; if this is not clear, nothing else can really be assessed. Following are some questions that will help in considering this.

Does the controlling idea reflect the assigned task? If you are directed to write about the influence of states’ rights in the Civil War conflict, and your controlling idea focuses solely on the issue of slavery, you should immediately see that your essay is probably off-topic and will
need to be completely rewritten – unless your stated controlling idea has not captured what you have actually written in the body’s essay. This is, in fact, a mirror of the next question:

Does the controlling idea actually control the content of the essay? I frequently see student essays with very clearly stated controlling ideas which are not then supported by the content of the essay. If this happens, you will most likely want to revise your controlling idea to reflect your content, as the content is more likely to be what you really wish to convey. (This is assuming, of course, that the content follows the assignment. If it doesn’t, and the controlling idea does, then you will need to rewrite the essay’s body to reflect the controlling idea.)

Will the controlling idea be clear to the essay’s readers? Less experienced writers do well to state the controlling idea of an essay explicitly in it; the more experience gained, the more likely you will be able to be less explicit and still be clear. You should, however, always be able to state the controlling idea of an essay in one complete sentence, no matter what its form in the essay.

Is the controlling idea stated in an effective place in the essay? This will depend on your purpose, the overall structure of the work, and the readers’ likely attitudes toward your claim.

Development / Support

Next in revising comes a fresh look at the ways the controlling idea has been developed and your assertions supported. Each statement should be considered carefully.

Are all assertions that need support backed up with evidence, such as factual information, expert testimony, examples, analysis, and so on?

If an assertion is not supported, can you depend upon your readers accepting it as true without support, or do you need to give evidence for it?

Is the evidence used to support each assertion the most appropriate and helpful? Examine your evidence according to the discussion in the last chapter: are examples relevant and representative, for example; are the experts you quote reliable; does your analysis fit the evidence, etc.? Keep your readers always in mind: even if certain evidence you have used is appropriate for the topic, it might not resonate with your specific readers.

Is the evidence used throughout the essay consistent, and does it add up to an effective and truthful argument for your controlling idea? Is it sufficient for your purpose? Have you repeated yourself or given more evidence than is really necessary anywhere?

Have you thoughtfully considered opposing viewpoints, finding common ground wherever possible, conceding when their ideas are correct, and respectfully refuting, through evidence and analysis, the ideas you believe to be wrong?

Structure

Even if you created an outline before completing your initial draft of an essay, you need to look at its structure as it actually turned out. Often, the very act of writing suggests new possibilities
for content, which can create havoc with your original plan for structure; sometimes the draft reveals flaws in the original plan; and it’s easy to repeat yourself as you draft, as you are focused on getting ideas on the page.

Creating an outline of the draft is most helpful at this point. Write one complete sentence summarizing each paragraph, then read these aloud to hear the basic structure of the whole. (If you can’t write a single sentence summarizing a paragraph, that’s a clue to check the paragraph for unity.) This way you will see if the order of ideas makes logical sense, and if ideas seem scattered or repeated in different places.

Some writers tout the cut-and-paste capabilities of the computer for rearranging ideas at this stage of revising. However, many suggest that while the feature is excellent for the mechanics of changing the draft (avoiding the need to retype it all), the best way to see if a new arrangement works is the old-fashioned way: print it out in hard copy, then use actual scissors and paste to cut it up into sections and move them around until you are satisfied with the logical movement of the piece. Dillard writes about using a conference room table for this process: “You walk along the rows; you weed bits, move bits, and dig out bits, bent over the rows with full hands like a gardener.” An excellent metaphor for writing – and the physical work with the text, as with a garden, can be far more productive than limiting your vision to the computer screen; you can see the whole at once and have a greater sense of where each piece fits into it than if you see only half a page at a time.

**Introductions**

An introduction has many purposes, but the most important is to keep the reader reading. Often the first try at an introduction is flat as the writer is simply trying to get words on the page and get the draft off the ground. Now is the time to ask some questions that will help you revise to a more effective beginning.

Does the introduction clearly introduce the topic of your essay? The controlling idea doesn’t have to appear here, but, no matter what your opening strategy is, the reader must know very quickly, and with confidence, the subject of your essay. Non-fiction introductions are not teasers, but information.

Does the introduction capture the interest of your readers? It’s not enough to make the topic clear; the introduction must intrigue the reader enough that he wishes to continue reading. The previous chapter offers a number of possible strategies for doing this; you should consider several different ones and choose one which will appeal to your particular audience.

Does the introduction show that the writer is knowledgeable about the topic?

Does the introduction make readers believe that the writer has their best interest in mind?

**Conclusions**

Remember that readers want to know why information they’ve been given is significant, or what they are expected to do about it, or how it affects their world – something to give not just a sense of closure but a sense of significance, why it matters.
Does the conclusion answer the question “So what?”

Does the conclusion offer your readers something to remember: a story, a fact, an assertion, etc., that will keep your controlling idea clear in their minds?

Does the conclusion leave readers with the same sense of good will the introduction set up? In other words, will readers believe the writer has their best interest in mind?

**The Four Revision Operations**

When we make changes in a draft, at any level, there are only four basic operations that we do: add, delete, substitute, or rearrange. I find that if I’m having some difficulty analyzing a draft to determine how it needs to be changed, using these four operations as a heuristic can help me get started, or to see a particular problem that has eluded me.

**Adding**

We tend to underestimate the desire and need of readers for information. While it’s possible to overwhelm with too much, more often the writer errs by assuming too much knowledge on the readers’ part. So when revising, ask yourself questions like these:

Do I need to explain some of my ideas more fully?

Do I need to add more examples?

Do I need to define some of my terms or describe some of my concepts?

Would some statistics or expert testimony help my readers understand a point I’ve made? Is further analysis needed to be clear? (I especially note that many of my student writers tend to think that quotations can stand on their own – but they need to be tied to the point the writer is made by explanation and analysis.)

**Deleting**

Of course, sometimes there is more information than is needed or that which is irrelevant, and these kinds of questions will help you identify such problems.

Have I used too many examples?

Have I explained a concept or idea more than once without need?

Have I used interesting information just because it was interesting, even though it doesn’t really support my point?

Have I given more background or contextual information than my readers need, or that they already know?

Have I defined or explained terms or concepts that my readers would already know quite well?
Substituting
This is simply the process of replacing something already written with something more effective.

Are there better examples or more reliable experts or clearer statistics than I’ve used?

Are any of my explanations or definitions unclear or even incorrect?

Does my introduction need to be more effective?

Is my conclusion just a needless summary?

Rearranging
This of course has to do with the structure of the piece, as discussed above. It can be applied at the paragraph level as well as the level of the whole essay; sometimes moving sentences around within a paragraph will create a more unified and coherent discussion.

Conclusion
“Writing is rewriting.” Those who write for a living, who have many years of experience and success, universally claim this as a simple fact. If it is true for professionals, how much more must it be for those who are still learning the fundamentals of effective writing. If we desire to serve our readers by offering them a vision of the truth, we owe it to them to thoughtfully rework every aspect of a piece before presenting it for their consideration.
Chapter V: Editing

“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (Prov. 16:24 NASB).

Many years ago, I had my students read an essay by Elisha Dov Hack protesting Yale’s refusal to allow him and other orthodox Jewish students to live at home their freshman year; their complaint was that overwhelming amount of immoral activity in the dorms placed a stumbling block for the purity of mind they pursued. The following sentences appeared in responses to this essay:

*If Yale has respect for what it says it has respect for, then why does it seem that it has no respect for those who have discretion to oppose living somewhere against their religion.*

*He had to see signs of explicit sexual conduct walking down the halls. (This one seems to be referring to the writer walking the halls, where explicitly sexual signs were posted on the walls.)*

*There is more at stake than just a rule. There is a lifelong belief which is trying to be followed.*

*This essay read by the audience could replace a different opinion about the college.*

*The essay is an effective policy claim because it attempts to change Yale’s policy concerning off-campus residency.*

*How Hack uses to support his claim is that everyone should have liberty . . .*

*By telling the audience how the dorm really is, he is making a confection with the audience.*

*By addressing this issue to the public can open a lot of eyes.*

Editing makes the written word clear, concise, and accurate. An essay may have a focused and interesting controlling idea, good support, and a logical organization, but if the sentences are hard to process and confusing, if they are dull and mechanical, if the words are not precise and therefore vague or puzzling, a reader will give up long before the end. It is a courtesy to the reader to make your prose readily accessible.

**Local Concerns**

While revision is making sure you have said what you want to say, editing is making sure you have said it how you want it said. In editing, we focus primarily on the local concerns of syntax (sentence structure) and diction (word choice). Of course, some editing will happen as you revise, but it is important to go over your work specifically at this level to be sure you have been as clear, concise, and accurate as possible.

**Clarity: A Note on Style**

Clarity is the first rule of all good writing. If the reader cannot understand what is written, there is no point in writing or reading. Many young writers, however, are overly concerned about style: they wish to develop a personal and distinguishable voice on the page and thus attend
more to creating such a voice than to simply making their ideas clear for the reader. Such attempts usually result in mere self-serving eccentricity, obscuring instead of illuminating meaning.

According to fiction writer Katherine Anne Porter, "You do not create a style. You work, and develop yourself; your style is an emanation from your own being." Rhetoric is "the good man speaking well," taught the Roman orator Quintilian: true excellence in speech or writing begins with good character on the part of the speaker or writer. And part of this good character is a genuine good will toward the audience, a desire to serve their best interests in both the message and the manner in which the message is conveyed. “Proper words in proper places” is the definition of style, satirist Jonathan Swift wrote; in other words, begin with clarity.

So concentrate on developing moral character, knowing your subject, and writing as clearly as possible for the sake of your readers: in time a unique voice will begin to emerge in your work. (And we must never forget that apprenticing ourselves in humility to editors and teachers and other authorities is the beginning of excellence; how can we know what excellence even is without those who have gone before us?)

Conciseness
Writers commonly create a lack of clarity by using unnecessary words, by not being concise. Conciseness is not, as it is commonly misdefined, simply using as few words as possible. Rather, it is making sure that every word does meaningful work. A short but vague statement might be less concise – because filled with meaningless fluff – than a longer but specific one in which each word helps the reader understand the point.

Wordy writers bury meaning under long phrases when single words will do, qualify ideas unnecessarily, repeat ideas in slightly different words, and generally use fluffy filler instead of getting to the point. They write “due to the fact that” instead of “because”; or “it was definitely a really great party” instead of “the party was fun”; or “I went to the store. At the store I bought some bread. The bread was whole wheat. The bread cost a whole lot” instead of “I bought expensive whole wheat bread.” More is less in the matter of clarity, as long as you aren’t cutting actual helpful information.

The statement above – “it was definitely a really great party” – can be made more concise by making it shorter and somewhat more specific as I did (“fun” tells us more than “great”), or it can be stated more specifically, making it longer, and yet also be more concise: “the games we played at the party helped us get to know each other better while also being funny and competitive.” Now it’s quite a bit longer, but it avoids the vagueness of “definitely” and “really” and “great” – instead, every word does meaningful work to help the reader understand why the writer enjoyed the party.

Precision
Another temptation is to use whatever words come first to mind, and neglect to consider whether these are the most precise way to convey a specific meaning. Mark Twain wrote that “the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug”: make your writing blaze instead of merely flicker.
Vague words create part of the problem of wordiness discussed in the last section, as well as being imprecise; simply saying “fun” instead of “great” (even though “fun” is still vague) creates a somewhat clearer meaning in describing a party, as we saw. Avoid similar overused words, like “wonderful” or “amazing” or “nice” – these convey no particular meaning to your readers, as each one of them will have a different idea of what they mean. Slang and colloquial terms are best avoided in formal writing as well, such as “cool” or “rad” or “gay” (in any of its various meanings); these expressions change meaning or go in and out of style almost daily and can easily create confusion.

Precise nouns are important because they name things and ideas and help us avoid confusion: a “podium” is not a “lectern,” for example; an “illusion” is not an “allusion,” and words like “thing,” “activity,” “situation,” and “aspect” convey no particular idea to readers at all. I know what you mean if you say the speaker stood behind the podium, but I also know that you are ignorant of the language you use, and that will affect my opinion of everything else you tell me. If you can’t be bothered to know the difference between the stage on which the speaker stands and the object on which he places his notes, I can’t help wondering how accurate you are with your facts and analyses, as well.

Precise verbs help us to be more concise as well as accurate. Think of all the synonyms you can for the word “walk”: pace, stride, saunter, toddle, amble, stroll, stagger, march . . . Each synonym creates an actual picture in the reader’s mind and allows the writer to avoid adverbs such as “quickly” or “slowly” which still don’t give as accurate a picture as the precise verb. As well, the “to be” verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being) often create both wordiness and imprecision. When you eliminate these from your writing, you will find you have to rethink and rewrite your sentences, making them more active, interesting, and accurate. The first sentence under “Conciseness” above provides an example: I first wrote it as “One of the most common ways writers create a lack of clarity is by use of unnecessary words” – perfectly understandable, but now, as “Writers commonly create a lack of clarity by using unnecessary words,” it is shorter and more direct, with the active verb “create” in most prominence.

Emphasis and Coherence
Any sentence can be reworded in a number of ways. Awareness of how a sentence’s wording emphasizes its ideas and how it relates to the sentences before and after it can help writers to clarify meaning and make their words easier for readers to process. In that same first sentence under conciseness, I added the phrase at the end – “by not being concise” – because the next sentence seemed to offer the definition of conciseness too abruptly and without context. Sometimes just changing the order of phrases will make an awkward sentence smoother or create a clearer connection between sentences.

Reading aloud is vital in editing, as it will allow you to hear actual errors (missed punctuation or an incorrect verb form, for example) and it will bring to the ear all kinds of more subtle problems with awkward syntax or abrupt transitions or unhelpful repetitions; then trying a variety of rewrites and reading them aloud will usually lead to a solution.
The Four Editing Operations
In editing, the changes we can make are the same four as in revising: adding, deleting, substituting, or rearranging – but at the local (sentence) level rather than at the global level. If I find an awkward or otherwise infelicitous sentence and can’t immediately identify the problem, I find that asking myself about each of these four operations is a helpful place to start.

**Adding**
Do I need to add a brief definition to make an idea clear? Do I need to add a transition to show the connection between two ideas? Do I need a clarifying phrase to help my reader understand my analysis or to identify a source, etc.?

**Deleting**
Do I need to delete redundant words and phrases? Do I need to delete sentences that repeat ideas already clearly given? Do I need to delete unnecessary words and phrases, such as vague qualifiers? Do I need to delete unnecessary adjectives or adverbs?

**Substituting**
Do I need to substitute strong verbs for weak ones or for forms of “to be”? Do I need to substitute single words or short phrases for wordy, indirect ones? Do I need to substitute precise, specific words for vague ones? Do I need to substitute precise transitions or prepositions for inaccurate ones? Do I need to substitute accurate words for ones that do not mean what I wish to convey?

**Rearranging**
Do I need to rearrange the words in a sentence to make a better transition or a clearer emphasis? Do I need to rearrange the sentences within a paragraph for greater coherency?

**Conclusion**
Editing diligently and thoroughly will not only keep you from writing inanities such as those at the beginning of the chapter, which make you look ignorant or lazy, but will serve your readers by helping them to follow your essay easily, sentence to sentence, without distraction. If you have followed the process recommended here of gathering information to find truth, and developing and structuring your ideas logically and clearly, then you will not want to fall short of excellence at this level and negate the rest of your hard work.
Chapter VI: Proofreading and Submission

“In all labor there is profit [...]” (Prov. 14:23 NASB)

Proofreading

Many of the saddest and most hilarious errors I find in student essays are simple matters of not proofreading carefully. I am always amused, for example, by statements like “I will defiantly use this technique in my teaching” – it appears that the first spell-check option under a mistyping of “definitely” is “defiantly,” as I encounter this error several times each semester. And of course there are multitudes of real words that spell-check doesn’t catch but which make no sense where they appear: “We learned to resemble firearms”; “they taught us defective driving”; “she lapsed into a comma.” Don’t make your readers laugh when you didn’t intend to write amusingly – proofread your work diligently.

Of course, you will have caught many of these errors as you revised and edited your work, but it is always wise to devote one or more readings to pure proofreading for typographical errors and mistakes you have missed as you paid more attention to content. I am a careful writer and proofreader who makes few mistakes of this sort even in drafting – yet I still find surprising, and sometimes distressing, errors in late drafts.

This is not a grammar handbook; you can find inexpensive ones anywhere and should invest in one if you have difficulty with the conventions of standard written English. Here I simply wish to point out what kinds of errors can occur that need your attention in the proofreading stage.

Spelling

Spell-check is a great boon to poor spellers, but it is vitally important to remember that it won’t catch real words that are the wrong words. You must check every word yourself to be sure it’s correct. If you have difficulty with spelling or typing particular words, be sure to check these specifically. My fingers don’t like to type the word “from”; so I often use the “search and replace” feature to search for all instances of “form” and change any that were supposed to have been “from.” Misspellings and wrong words label the writer as ignorant or lazy; avoid that label so that readers will listen to your message without the distraction of wondering if you care.

Punctuation

Punctuation conventions in English are not really difficult, and can make all the difference in how your work is received. If you have difficulty in this area, it is well worth the effort to learn, as otherwise you will tend to write short, simple sentences that are boring and hard to process in order to avoid having to use commas, semicolons, and so on. Your ideas are worthy of your best writing, and the ability to use all punctuation marks effectively is crucial to that writing.

Remember, too, that punctuation conventions were not devised by English teachers to torment students or give us something to mark up. They have evolved over time as means of creating and clarifying meaning. For example, “Texans who own oil wells are rich” does not mean the same thing as “Texans, who own oil wells, are rich.” I know of one instance where an error as small as a misplaced comma cost a company several million dollars when they began a construction project the message was supposed to tell them to wait on (and it cost a copy-editor his profession, as well).
Grammar
By grammar we mean the way words function in relation to each other in a sentence: do subjects and verbs agree in number; do pronouns agree with their antecedents; has the appropriate verb tense and form been used; etc. Keep in mind with grammar that it is still unacceptable in standard written English to refer to singular nouns with plural pronouns when the noun does not refer to a specific man or a specific woman: “the teacher writes out their lesson.” Instead you must either use the inclusive pronoun – “the teacher writes out his lesson” – or both pronouns – “the teacher writes out his or her lesson” – or make your noun plural – “teachers write out their lessons.” Don’t use “she” as an inclusive pronoun, as it often distracts readers. And never use s/he: readers hear the words they read, and this symbol is unpronounceable; it also draws attention to your desperate desire to be politically correct instead of to your message.

Using correct pronouns, such as its/it’s or their/they’re or your/you’re, is also a grammar issue, and errors with these common words are particularly annoying.

Mechanics
“Mechanics” is the term we use for use of apostrophes, capitalization, italics, hyphens, quotation marks, parentheses, abbreviations, and numbers. These symbols signal meaning, and their improper use can both distract and mislead readers. A good grammar handbook will give clear instruction on their use, and you can also find help with them at such websites as the Purdue OWL. It’s not difficult to learn mechanics; again, don’t let errors in this area keep readers from listening to your ideas.

Submission
Once you have finally proofread your work, it’s time to send it out into the world. The “world” may be your instructor’s desk or an international publication, but whatever its scope, you want to submit your work in a manner that shows you are proud of your accomplishment and that makes your audience take you seriously.

Most English instructors will expect you to follow MLA guidelines for submission of your work; classes in other disciplines will likely have other guidelines. Following those instructions shows that you care about your work and respect the class and your instructor, and it will help you create a habit of reading and attending to details. It’s easy to feel that those details are “picky,” but the formats required of you have been developed for specific reasons, whether or not you know what these are, and they help your instructor or other readers in handling your submission. For one simple example, when every submission has the name in the same place, it saves an instructor time in recording grades and returning the essays – not a small matter with thirty or fifty names.

Every venue outside of academia will have its own set of submission guidelines, whether you are writing a workplace memo, a letter to the editor, a professional journal article, a web page, or a novel. In the classroom, your instructor is likely to merely take points off if you don’t follow guidelines; in the rest of the world, if you fail to do so, your work will never get past the first reader’s desk. No matter how brilliant your idea, how well written and arranged and argued, if the guidelines ask for 12-point Times New Roman font and you submit 10-point Ariel – it won’t
be read. Busy editors don’t have time to waste, and, since failure to follow guidelines suggests lack of responsibility and respect, it provides a good means for rapid lessening of the usually huge pile of submissions.
Chapter VII: Conclusion

“Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person [ . . . ]” (Col. 4:6).

Students often think that they need to “figure out” each individual teacher in order to succeed in writing. It’s true that teachers and editors have small preferences they wish their students to follow – contractions or no contractions? brackets around ellipses in a quote or not? However, these are minor details that don’t determine the true quality of the writing, the type of things that are covered in publisher’s style books for their authors.

All teachers and editors want the same thing: writing that serves readers through its effective communication of truth.

It’s harder than learning some formula into which you pour words without much thought – but it’s also far more satisfying. The joy of writing lies in coming as close as humanly possible to saying what one means, and saying it so that others can understand it and be influenced by it – and want to read it. Only students in school have a captive audience who must read what they write no matter how carelessly and inaccurately written it may be. The rest of us must earn a hearing, and the morally right way to do so is to be clear and honest.

It is, of course, possible to earn an audience through a kind of eloquence that holds no meaning. Just use as many abstract words in easy-to-form phrases as you can, and there's always a crowd who will ooh and aah over your genius. (For an excellent treatise on this, try George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language," easily found on the internet.) But the real writer wants none of this. He wants to say something that he is convinced is important, and he wants his reader to understand exactly what it is and why it is important: he wishes above all else to be clear. He is not concerned with impressing readers, but with serving them.

Indeed, there is the heart of the matter. So many students think they must impress us. (They often have good reason to believe this, given their first twelve years of schooling.) And so they use big words and long phrases and abstractions that carry fuzzy feel-good connotations . . . and are then shocked to find they have earned low grades.

The ones who learn from this learn a most important lesson: that we are looking for writing which serves its readers; writers who respect their readers enough to make their ideas as crystal-clear as they can and who respect themselves enough to make those ideas honest, true to their convictions; writers who do not wish to waste their readers' time and thus take whatever of their own time is necessary to accomplish this goal. Even when one writes for oneself, this principle holds; why should I bother to journal if I weren't honestly seeking some sort of clarity of thought, truthfulness that will serve me as I embrace or reject the ideas I explore? I serve myself in my personal writing, and surely I should love my neighbor as myself when I write for others.

Writing to serve readers: what other reason can there be to bother?
APPENDIX: MLA FORMAT

Manuscript Preparation
Some instructors in other departments will accept these format guidelines for assignments in their classes. Others, however, will have different guidelines they prefer. Always check, and diligently follow the instructions given you for each situation.

General Principles
The physical appearance of your work suggests a great deal about your attitude towards the work itself and the course. It is therefore in your best interest to present your work neatly and consistently in order to make a good impression.

All work should be submitted in the most legible form possible.

Paper should never be crumpled or stained.

Ink, whether ball-point or printer, should be dark and not smudged. Do your work early enough that if a printer runs out of ink or doesn’t work properly, you have time to locate another printer or buy a new cartridge. Your failure to do this does not create a need for your instructor to accept your work late. You should always have multiple pens with you for in-class work.

Staple any assignment that consists of multiple pages. Do not expect your instructor to staple assignments for you that are prepared outside of class.

You should be fully prepared to submit all work before you walk into class so that your instructor doesn’t have to waste class time waiting on you when he requests your work.

Handwritten Assignments
Any work which you do in class or are allowed to handwrite outside of class should first of all be legible.

Always use blue or black ink unless your instructor specifies otherwise.

Use regular sized white notebook paper, college- or wide-ruled. Use one side of the page only. Skip lines if your handwriting requires it for legibility.

Never tear work from a spiral notebook and turn it in with the ragged edges straggling about.

Use the same heading and page numbering format as given below for typed assignments.

Typed Assignments
Use MLA (Modern Language Association) format for submission of typed manuscripts. This format does not use a title page. (If an assignment requires a cover sheet, these directions still apply for the first page of the assignment itself unless you are directed otherwise.) If you create a template document for this style, you will not constantly make errors by re-typing it for each assignment. Simply open the template, choose “Save As,” and name the new document.
Everything in MLA format is double-spaced. There is no occasion for single-spacing, triple-spacing, or any other spacing. This includes the heading, before and after the title, the works cited list, and indented quotations. Set your program to double spacing and do not change it.

All margins are to be set at 1” unless the instructor specifies otherwise. Do not widen the margins to try to make your assignment appear longer. The Bryan computers default to 1¼ inch margins; you must change these for your work.

Use only Times New Roman 12 font for all work and all parts of every work. (Your title is not different from your text, for example.)

Your last name and page number (Doe 1) belong in the upper right-hand corner of every page, including page one of your manuscript. This should be one-half inch from the top of the page. To make this work properly, set your margins at 1”, then create a header, select “Insert page number,” select the top right side for the number. Then type your last name before the number and add one or two spaces between them. The header should then automatically be at ½”.

One inch from the top of the page (at the top of your margin, in other words), in the left-hand corner, type the following information, double-spaced (explanations are contained in square brackets):

Janie Doe 7239 [this is your box number]
Professor Smith
English 411A [this is the course # and section letter]
Date [due date of assignment; if turned in late, add a slash and the date you turn it in: Due Date/Presentation Date]

Title

Double space following the date and center the title of your essay, as above. Do not italicize your title. Do not make it bold face. Do not underline it. Do not put it in quotation marks. Do not use a different font size or style.

Double space following the title and begin your essay. Indent each paragraph opening 1/2” (one tab).

Be sure you don’t leave single lines of a paragraph at the bottom or top of a page. Most programs have a way to automatically format your text to avoid such “widows” and “orphans.”
MLA Documentation Format For Essays Using Sources
The use of sources requires great care. Documentation of words and ideas is the scholarly form of “giving honor to whom honor is due.” Every discipline has its particular style of documentation; English uses that style developed by the Modern Language Association. Any question concerning the correctness of a particular citation will thus be resolved in your English classes by reference to the most current MLA Handbook, available to you in the bookstore or on permanent reserve in the library, or to your course handbook. (While your handbook or other texts may have a summary of MLA style, these are not always correct or current. The MLA Handbook will always take precedence over other sources unless your instructor specifies otherwise.) Other disciplines may use documentation styles such as Chicago, Turabian, or APA. While some of your professors in other departments may accept MLA documentation, some will require use of the style common to their discipline, and it is your obligation to learn and use that style. Once you understand the principles of documentation, the differences in specific formats are relatively easy to learn and follow.

What follows here is only the most basic explanation of MLA style, to help you understand its purposes and principles. You will most certainly need to make reference to the MLA Handbook or your textbook summaries of it for specific questions of documentation.

A Note on Choosing Sources
Choose sources for your essays with great care. In many subjects, the more recent the source, the better, especially public policy and cultural issues. This is not necessarily true in areas such as literature and Bible, however, in which the subject matter itself may not change, and older commentaries carry as much value as more recent ones. You might wish to ask about this when given specific assignments to be sure you are choosing appropriately. As you read up on your topic, you will tend to see a few names keep coming up — try to find articles or books by these recognized experts.

The Internet has opened a world in which anyone can publish anything — and far too many people do. The databases provided on the Bryan intranet, such as Proquest and JSTOR, generally carry credible professional sources. On-line versions of magazines and newspapers generally provide credible sources, also. However, when using search engines on the Internet to find other sources, be particularly careful to choose sources which are credible. “Janie’s homepage” may be interesting, but Janie may not know any more than you do about the subject you are researching.

Generally, in choosing web sources, you should be able to identify the author of an article and find his credentials to write on the topic, OR the article should be part of a site sponsored by a reliable organization. You can often identify these sites by the URL endings .org, .gov, or .edu, and you should be able to find the organization’s name and affiliations as well as a statement of its goals and mission. Nothing kills an argument faster than sources which your reader knows to be unreliable or so biased as to be automatically suspect. Do realize, however, that you still must exercise discernment about every source you use; even if you find it in a professional journal, it may have false information or poor analysis and interpretation.
In-Text Citations of Sources

In-text citations are intended to fulfill three purposes:

1. The first purpose of in-text citations is to introduce a source to the reader in a way that suggests its credibility.

   Every time you first refer to a source, introduce that source to your reader. Whenever it is available, give the author’s name and always use it as the primary reference to the source. Also give some identifying information which will suggest the author’s credibility, and, usually, give the title of the source. There are various ways to word such information, of course, but here are a couple of examples:

   a. Shakespeare scholar David Bergeron says in *Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater*, “-----------” (211).

   b. According to Professor James W. Hartman, editor of *The Dictionary of American Regionalisms*, “-----------.”

   Later references to a source already introduced can generally use just the author’s last name:

   c. Bergeron also notes that ------------ (214).

   NEVER refer to any author by his first name only — except in the unlikely event that you know him personally, are on a first-name basis with him, and are writing an informal personal essay about your experiences which included him.

2. The second purpose of in-text citations is to indicate the specific location of quoted or summarized/paraphrased material in a source so that a reader could find it.

   Notice that example (a) above gives the page number on which the quotation appears. This information goes in parentheses following the closing quotation marks but before the period which ends the sentence. You must also cite paraphrased or summarized information from a text; example (c) above shows how summarized information appears without quotation marks but with citation.

   After introducing the source, you may have occasion to quote from it without using the author’s name in your own text, in which case your parenthetical citation must include the author’s last name — note that no punctuation occurs in the citation: (Bergeron 153). However, it is better to use the name in introducing the quotation whenever possible.

   Example (b) above has no page number because it is a quotation from a personal interview. Web sources may not have page numbers, either. If not, do not refer to page numbers of a version you print off, as those numbers will vary from printer to printer. However, sources drawn from books or professional journals on the web, such as you might find through *Proquest*, for example, may have page numbers you should use.
3. The third purpose of in-text citations is to take the reader easily to the Works Cited entry for the source to find publication information.

The MLA has tried to simplify in-text citations as much as possible; therefore, footnotes and endnotes are not used, and nothing but the most basic information is given. All other information which might be of interest to a reader in identifying the source is contained in the Works Cited list at the end of the essay. If the two purposes above are fulfilled, this third purpose will automatically be fulfilled as well. Because the Works Cited list is always alphabetized, an in-text citation must take the reader directly to the first word of the Works Cited entry for the source — usually an author’s last name but sometimes a title, if the author’s name is not known.

Never, never refer to a source in your text by such things as the name of the magazine it appeared in or the website where you found it. These kinds of information do not readily take the reader to your Works Cited entry and may in fact be confusing if you cite more than one article from the same magazine or website. Whenever you know the author’s name, give him his due. Never refer to a source in any other way, except in the rare occasions when the author’s name is not published, as is sometimes the case for newspaper editorials, for example, or information from a corporate or government source. On websites, if you cannot find an author’s name, you should seriously question the credibility of the source and only use it if it is firmly established in some other way (if it is the website of a reputable organization or a university, for example).

The Works Cited List

Format
Your Works Cited begins on a new page immediately following your text, and paginated with your text. Center the title (Works Cited) at the 1” margin, double space everything as usual, begin each entry at the left margin, and indent the second and following lines of each entry. This format makes it easy for your readers to find your sources by the author’s last name.

Terminology
Works Cited: a list containing all and only those sources which are actually cited in your essay. You may assume this is the type of list required by your instructor unless you are directed to use one of the others.

Works Consulted: a list containing sources which you consulted for background information but have not actually cited in your essay.

Bibliography: a list containing both works cited and works consulted.

Annotated Bibliography: a list which includes annotations describing each source. If your instructor requests an annotated bibliography, be sure you understand what format is expected of you — the format given in some of your textbooks is not the same as that given in the MLA Handbook.
Purpose
The purpose of the Works Cited list is to give your reader sufficient information to find the exact sources which you refer to in your essay. MLA style is designed to give this information in as concise and complete a format as possible. Summaries of MLA documentation style such as your other textbooks contain will give you basic information on creating a Works Cited list, but you may well need to refer to the *MLA Handbook* itself for how to format some of your entries. Whenever you write a source-based essay, You are expected to follow MLA style precisely. Ask your instructor or a Writing Center tutor for help if you are uncertain about any specific citation.

Precision
Precision is important. In creating Works Cited entries, simply follow the example you find of the same kind of source. Follow the example precisely, however: even each punctuation mark carries meaning for the reader, and it is easy to confuse or distract by ignoring the conventions — leading the reader to question your integrity and credibility. It will help you to read the introductory section to the type of source you are documenting.

MLA style has formats for every kind of source imaginable. Some to keep in mind: books, forwards and prefaces to books, translations, reference books, articles in anthologies, newspapers, periodicals (magazines and journals), reprints, recordings, TV and radio shows, interviews, various electronic sources, and many more. It is important to use the correct format for your source, as, for example, a first edition and a fifth edition of a book may differ radically, or a reprint or web article may have been edited and revised from the original. If your reader thinks you are referring to a first edition or original article and cannot find the information you cite, he may assume you lack integrity.

The *MLA Handbook* explains the principles of documenting the various kinds of sources, as well as giving numerous examples of Works Cited entries. Summaries of this information in other texts may not be clear or complete, so be sure to check the *MLA Handbook* itself if you are not sure what a certain portion of a sample entry refers to (for example, is a number in a periodical entry a volume number, issue number, or something else?). Here is a small sample of the kinds of Works Cited questions you will find answers to in the *MLA Handbook* — and you will be responsible for exercising the answers to such questions in your essays:

- How do I know which place of publication to use if a book’s title page lists several?
- Which copyright date is the one to use if several are listed?
- What if a source has more than one author?
- When do I use volume numbers, issue numbers, and dates of publication for periodical articles? In what form are these numbers to be given?
- How do I cite an entry from a reference book such as a dictionary or encyclopedia?
- What if I use several articles by different authors from a single book?
- What if I use two sources written by the same author?
- Do I use both city and state for the place of publication?
- How do I abbreviate publishers’ names?
- . . . and many, many more.
**Web Citations**

Citation of sources from the Internet has not yet been standardized, and the MLA guidelines can be complex and confusing. Therefore, use the following guidelines as a beginning point, then check the MLA guidelines at <http://www.mla.org> (click on “MLA Style,” then on “Frequently Asked Questions”), then check with your instructor if you have further questions.

1. Online Sources Available to Anyone with Internet Access
   These would be sources you find through search engines such as Yahoo!, Excite, Google, etc. Only use the URL if it would be difficult for readers to find the page without it. The first “example” tells you what goes where; the second is an example of an article which does not have a listed author.

   **Author’s Name. “Title of Article.” Title of Website. Sponsoring Organization [if any]. Date of web publication. Publishing information if an on-line version of a magazine [same format as for print version]. Web. Date of Access.**


   Notes: If you need to use a URL, place it in angle brackets so the final period is not thought to be part of it. Also, it is preferable to cut and paste the URL in order to be sure it is accurate. Do not put a period between the date of access and the URL, as they make a single section of the listing.

   The sponsoring organization would be, for example, the name of the university if it is an .edu site, or the name of the corporation (IBM, e.g.) or organization (National Organization for Women). Don’t write this as “.com/org/edu/gov” entry: it’s not “iwf.com” but “Independent Women’s Forum.” If you cannot discern what the sponsoring organization is, you might want to consider whether the source is sufficiently credible for scholarly work.

2. Online Databases (on Bryan Intranet)
   The online databases at Bryan are subscribed to by the college for a fee. They are not available to an off-campus user via the URL. so a URL is never used in their citations.


Notes: Capitalize the title of the article according to the normal rules for capitalization, not according to the way it’s listed in the database. (This applies to all titles in your Works Cited list, by the way.)

Italicize the name of the database itself, as if it were a book or magazine title.

Don’t forget the issue date of the article if given (the first date in the above examples), and the date you accessed it (the last date in each of the examples). If your source has both volume and issue numbers, follow the Sudol example: 53 is the volume number, 8 the issue number. Don’t forget page numbers if available (920-932 in the same example).

**Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Quoting**

When using sources in your work, your main goal should be to present their ideas fairly and accurately. Never use quotations in a way that negates their context (suggesting the author’s idea is something other than it is), and never summarize or paraphrase source material in a way that presents the author’s ideas inaccurately. The Golden Rule applies here: how would you like for other writers to present your ideas? Show them the same courtesy.

Following is a quotation from an essay. After it you will find examples of appropriate and inappropriate ways to summarize, paraphrase, and quote from a source.

**Original Text**

“Language, which is thus predicative, is for the same cause sermonic. We are all of us preachers in private or public capacities. We have no sooner uttered words than we have given impulse to other people to look at the world, or some small part of it, in our way. Thus caught up in a great web of inter-communication and inter-influence, we speak as rhetoricians affecting one another for good or ill. That is why I must agree with Quintilian that the true orator is the good man, skilled in speaking — good in his formed character and right in his ethical philosophy. When to this he adds fertility in invention and skill in the arts of language, he is entitled to that leadership which tradition accords him” (224).


**Summarizing**

If you give a brief summary of an author’s ideas, be sure you give credit for it! If you are summarizing the main idea of an entire article, you needn’t give page numbers, but the way you
introduce the summary should suggest its scope. If you are summarizing a section or single point, give the page numbers.

(a) In his essay “Language is Sermonic,” philosopher and rhetorician Richard M. Weaver argues that rhetoric is a moral art and its teachers must place values — truth — above mere pragmatism.

(This is a summary of the article’s main point, thus no page number is cited. This would also represent a first reference in an essay, as the author’s entire name is given, the title of the work is given, and some indication of Weaver’s credentials is given.)

(b) Because it is the nature of language to influence others, Weaver says, only men of good character who seek the truth should be called orators (224).

(This summary of the paragraph gives the page number on which it is found.)

Paraphrasing
Paraphrasing ideas in research essays means to put them into your own words. This does not mean merely substituting a few synonyms and leaving the text essentially the same! (There is a place for something rather like this — though not so simplistic — in literary paraphrases, but that is for a different purpose.) You must change both the wording and the sentence structure of the original so that the paraphrase sounds like your own style and voice. A good paraphrase shows that you understand the ideas well enough to explain them in your own unique manner.

(c) Weaver claims that because we use language, and language by definition makes statements which are true or false, we are all necessarily “preaching” to each other, inviting and encouraging our audience to see things from our unique perspective rather than another’s (224).

(Note the page number follows the paraphrase. This paraphrase of the first three sentences takes into account what Weaver has already explained about language being “predicative.”)

Quoting
Choose direct quotations judiciously. Do not fill your text with them, and do not use many — if any — longer than a sentence or two. Indented quotations (four lines or more) should be rare indeed.

When using direct quotations, never just “drop” them into your text to stand alone. Always tie them into your own writing in some appropriate way.

(d) According to Weaver, “We are all of us preachers in private or public capacities” (224).
Weaver then draws his conclusion: “Language, which is thus predicative, is for the same cause sermonic” (224).

Richard M. Weaver, in his essay “Language is Sermonic,” defines Quintilian’s “good man” as “good in his formed character and right in his ethical philosophy” (224).

Thus Weaver equates the “sermonic” nature of language with its “predicative” nature (224).

If, then, as Weaver claims, language is by nature “sermonic” and “we speak as rhetoricians affecting one another for good or ill” (224), the Biblical teachings on the power of the tongue make perfect sense. None of our words is without consequence.

As Weaver says, by using language “we have given impulse to other people to look at the world [. . .] in our way” (224).
{Use an ellipsis — three periods with spaces between them — if you leave out part of a quotation. The brackets indicate it is your ellipsis, not the source’s. Be sure you don’t change the source’s meaning by deleting part of a quotation! The *MLA Handbook* gives more guidelines on use of the ellipsis.}

(j) Weaver says the orator should be a leader “[w]hen to [good character] he adds fertility in invention and skill in the art of language” (224).

{Any changes or additions made to the original quotation must be put in square brackets. The original capital letter *W* must be lower case to fit the writer’s sentence, so it is placed in brackets. The bracketed words good character replace the potentially ambiguous pronoun reference this.}

For further examples, see the *MLA Handbook*. If you have *any* question about the use of sources, *ask*! Plagiarism is a serious offence which, both inside and outside the academy, has cost people jobs and reputations. Learn to avoid it now.