

Chapter 2

The Writing Situation: Context Is Everything

Context is worth 80 IQ points.

— Alan Kay

Writing exists for a variety of purposes — to inform, to entertain, to please, to conduct business, to express emotion — but its primary function over the past four or five millennia has been to argue. That is, writing has been used to assert that something is true or that it is good or bad, or to urge our fellow humans to follow a particular course of action. This type of writing — whose purpose is meaningful discussion and consideration of ideas — is known as **rhetoric**. People often use the term *rhetoric* pejoratively, as in “Oh, that’s just more rhetoric,” implying that someone’s words are empty or don’t mean much. But in fact, *rhetoric* comes from the Greek *rhetor*, meaning “orator,” “lecturer,” or “teacher.”

Rhetoric simply means talking, teaching, or making a point through argument.

Most arguments are written out of a sense of need, a desire to explain to others how we interpret the world around us and to ask others to agree with us or join us in our causes. It is that sense of individual and shared need that creates the **rhetorical situation**, the environment in which the argument is made — also known as the **writing context**.

To gain true understanding of a text — and indeed, to create a text that can be understood — one must always consider its context. It’s tempting to think of writing simply as a text, when in reality writing is a Text-Plus. *Plus what*, you ask? Well, plus the writer, for one thing. And the reader. And the context — the time, place, and situation in which the writer creates the text and the reader encounters the text.



The word **context** comes from the Latin *con* (“together”) and *texere* (“to weave”). It means “weaving together.”

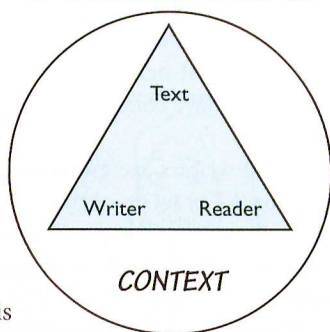
So the environment in which the writer, text, and reader exist — the writing context — is a weaving together of attitudes, needs, values, ideas, and events.

The Communication Triangle

The diagram to the right illustrates the key players involved in any piece of writing. It's called the **communication triangle**, and its meaning is essentially this: writer, reader, and text — the three components represented by the points of the triangle — are required players any time written communication occurs. If any of these components is missing, communication does not happen.

The circle that surrounds the triangle — i.e., the context — is not a player in the same way that the writer, reader, and text are players. Rather, context is like the air we breathe. Because context is the time, place, and situation surrounding the communication, it's just there. For example, when L. Frank Baum published his novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in the year 1900, his intent was to provide a fantasy story for children. But by the time Victor Fleming made Baum's novel into the film *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939, Americans were in the depths of the Great Depression, and the story had come to be seen as a commentary on wealth and power as compared to poverty and powerlessness. In this way, the same story can take on a different meaning because its context — as well as its audience — has changed.

The Communication Triangle



Note that the story's title changed, too — the word *wonderful* is missing from the name of the film. Why might that be?



The three points of the communication triangle — and the context that surrounds them — are not only necessary for communication to occur; they are also crucial to the creation of meaning. Words on a page have no meaning without a reader because meaning is something that exists only in the mind of the reader.

Here, try it yourself: The sentence “Art is a lie that reveals the truth,” attributed to the artist Pablo Picasso, could mean many different things to many different people. In fact, it could even mean many different things to one person. How many ways can you think of to interpret that sentence? The more interpretations you can imagine, the more you’ll start to realize that a text can certainly exist without a reader, but the *meaning* of that text is dependent on the reader.

In other words, written communication doesn’t exist unless a reader exists. Writing is often an intensely personal thing — born of strong emotion and created in response to significant individual experiences — but it is ultimately a social phenomenon. It is a means of connection between humans. It is, in a sense, our most permanent method of communication. It’s how we understand those who have come before us and how we leave word for those who will come after us.

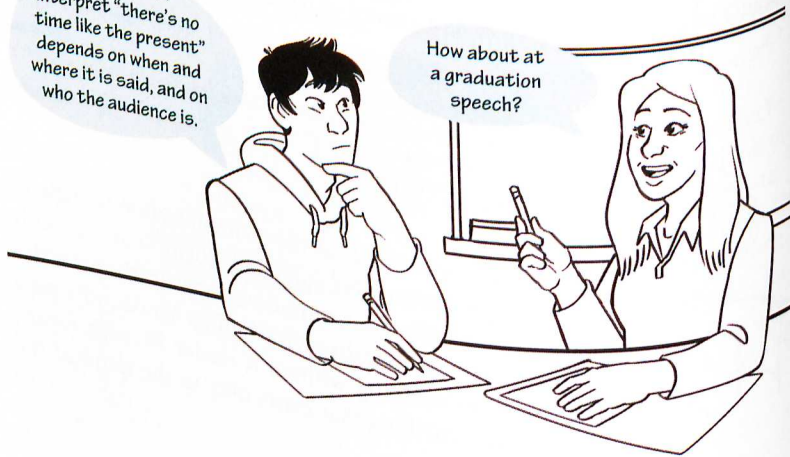
Good writers are aware of the dynamic nature of communication, so they get into the practice of thinking not just about their topics, or about their own ideas about those topics, but also about their readers. The reader, after all, plays an important role in determining the meaning of the text that the writer has written.

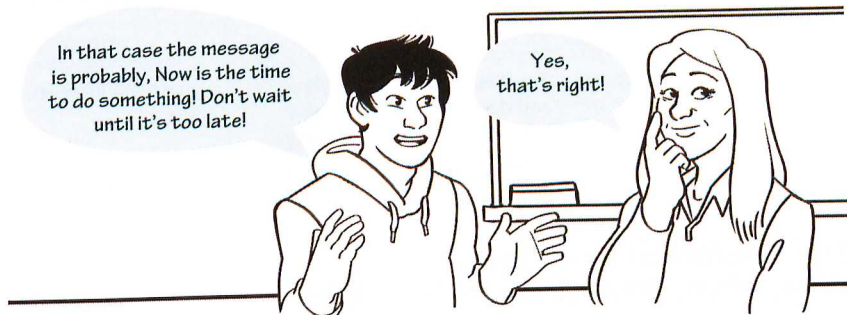
What we mean is this: different readers may interpret a writer’s statement in different ways. For example, if you heard someone say, “There’s no time like the present,” how would you interpret that?

Different Readers Read Texts Differently

Hmmm. How I interpret “there’s no time like the present” depends on when and where it is said, and on who the audience is.

How about at a graduation speech?





See? The speaker and the message are the same each time, but a different audience (or reader) changes the meaning of the message.

► **Talk Amongst Yourselves ...**

Now is a good time to get together with a partner or a group of classmates for a discussion of "There's no time like the present." How might this statement mean different things to different audiences in different situations? Can you think of other audiences whose interpretations would be different from the interpretations given above? See if you can come up with your own example of a sentence that could mean different things in different contexts.

► **Now You Try: The Communication Triangle**

Using the handy chart on page 16, mix and match the various speakers, messages, and audiences. Thinking carefully about what the speaker might be **implying** (hinting or suggesting) as well as what the audience might be **inferring** (deducing or assuming), try to imagine how each message might end up communicating different meanings. *Note:* This exercise might be even more fun in groups!

The Communication Triangle: Speaker, Message, Audience

Speaker	Message	Audience
you	Be careful — there's rough road ahead.	a bartender
a US senator	I regret nothing.	a newspaper reporter
the authors of this book	There is a time and a place for everything.	your mom
Spider-Man	A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.	a group of firefighters
a washed-up TV star from decades ago	The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.	a group of Olympic athletes

The Rhetorical Situation: Who, What, When, Where, How, Why

The late-twentieth-century rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer found it useful to discuss context as the *rhetorical situation*. In other words, he looked at all the players involved in creating meaning. Crucial to this situation was the *exigence*. (Big word, eh? Don't worry; we'll walk you through this.) The exigence is the precise moment at which something special happens, or fails to happen, prompting the arguer to make an argument.

Consider an example of an exigence: Imagine that a senator is holding a public meeting at which he advocates going to war. Attending the senator's speech is the parent of a soldier killed in action. It's not hard to imagine that the parent might feel compelled to speak out at the meeting.

In his best-known essay, rather unsurprisingly titled "The Rhetorical Situation," Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as containing the following elements:

The term *exigence* comes from the Latin verb *exigere*, meaning "to demand." So an exigence is an event or a circumstance that demands an argument, compelling the arguer to make it.



Elements of the Rhetorical Situation

EXIGENCE	What happens to compel the argument?
PEOPLE	Who is involved in the exigence? What are their roles?
RELATIONS	What are the connections or power relationships among the people involved?
LOCATION	Where does the discourse occur?
SPEAKER	Who is compelled to make an argument?
AUDIENCE	Whom does the speaker address? Why?
METHOD	How does the speaker address the audience?
INSTITUTIONS	What are “the rules” governing all of the above elements?

And here’s how those elements might be identified and described in the hypothetical situation we introduced in the previous paragraph:

- ▶ The **exigence** is really twofold: both the senator’s announcement and the threat of impending war compel the parent to speak.
- ▶ The **people** involved are many, but for our purposes, let’s say they are the senator and the parent who is compelled to speak.
- ▶ The **relations** between these two people are interesting: they ostensibly have a public-servant-to-constituent relationship, but in many ways the public servant (the senator) is much more powerful than the constituent (the parent).
- ▶ The **location** is a public meeting, likely populated by the parent’s fellow citizens as well as the senator’s staff members and, perhaps, the media.
- ▶ We know that the **speaker** is the parent of a soldier killed in action, and we are probably safe in making some assumptions based on what we know (the parent likely feels grief, for example), but we are not safe in assuming much beyond that (we can’t assume, for example, that the parent is opposed to war).
- ▶ The **audience** is certainly the senator as well as those whom the senator symbolically represents (other senators, the president). However, the audience also includes the other citizens attending the meeting and, if the media are present, the population at large as well.
- ▶ Because we’re creating a hypothetical situation, we don’t know the **method** of the speaker’s communication. But given the circumstances described

here, we can develop some ideas about what might succeed and what might fail rhetorically: Should the parent be loud? Quiet? Logical? Passionate? Brief? Thorough? Personal? Detached? Should the parent address only the senator or the citizens as well? How about TV cameras — should the parent directly address the larger population via technology? Should this parent shout? Cry? Use humor? Be sarcastic? The questions to consider go on

- ▶ The **institutions** involved in this situation are both simple and complex, both large and small. The parent is speaking in a representative democracy, for one thing, which means that the right to self-expression is guaranteed, as is the right to question government officials. These are “the rules.” But other rules are at play as well. There are community standards — is this a town or city in which the citizens are typically politically active? What difference might this make in the parent’s decision-making process regarding means of communication?

By now you’ve probably realized that much of what we have just examined is, in fact, what we consider naturally, if unconsciously, whenever we encounter a communicated argument.

What we’re asking you to do now is to be more conscious and deliberate in your consideration of the elements of any rhetorical situation. Consider how these elements affect communication — both in your role as the creator of an argument and in your role as the audience for an argument. Sometimes — often, actually — the difference between a pretty good argument and a civilization-changing rhetorical event is purely a matter of the speaker choosing the right words at the right time for the right audience.

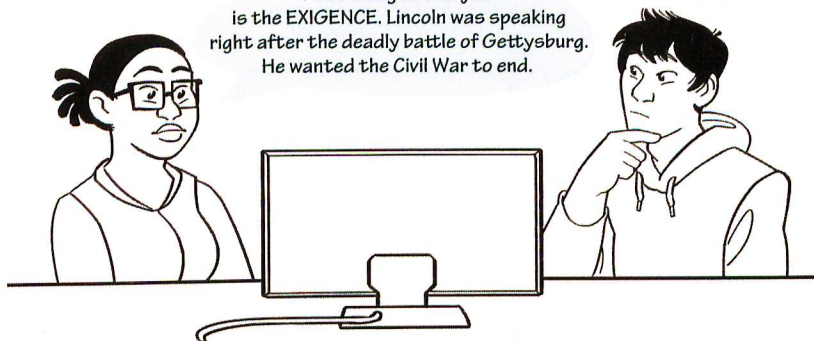
▶ **Let Us Show You: Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation**

For her US history class, Mara has been assigned to read and discuss Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, after which she will write an analysis of its rhetorical situation. The Gettysburg Address can be found in its entirety at a number of locations around the Web. We recommend a site called **ourdocuments.gov**, which is an official collection of important documents chronicling US history, with useful contextual information also provided. Or you can simply turn to Appendix C, Readings for Writers on page 483 of this book and read the address.

We now join Mara’s analysis of the rhetorical situation of the Gettysburg Address, with an assist from Casey, already in progress:

Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation

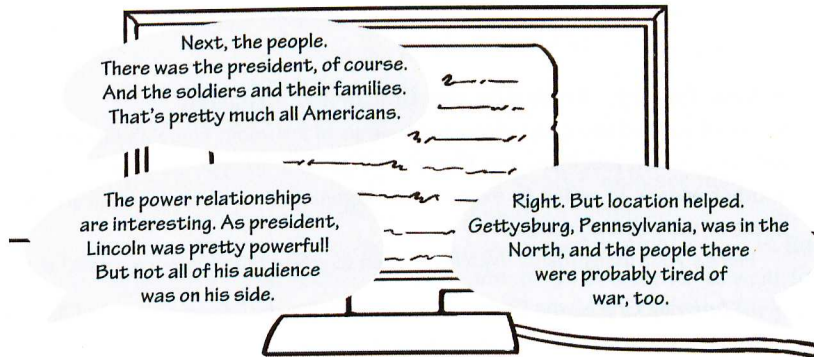
First thing to analyze is the EXIGENCE. Lincoln was speaking right after the deadly battle of Gettysburg. He wanted the Civil War to end.



Next, the people. There was the president, of course. And the soldiers and their families. That's pretty much all Americans.

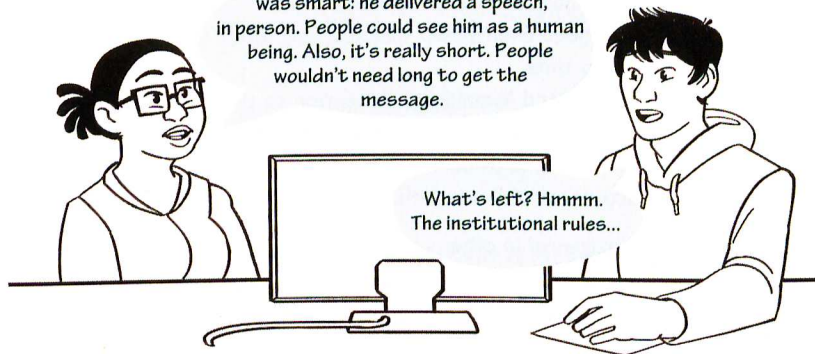
The power relationships are interesting. As president, Lincoln was pretty powerful! But not all of his audience was on his side.

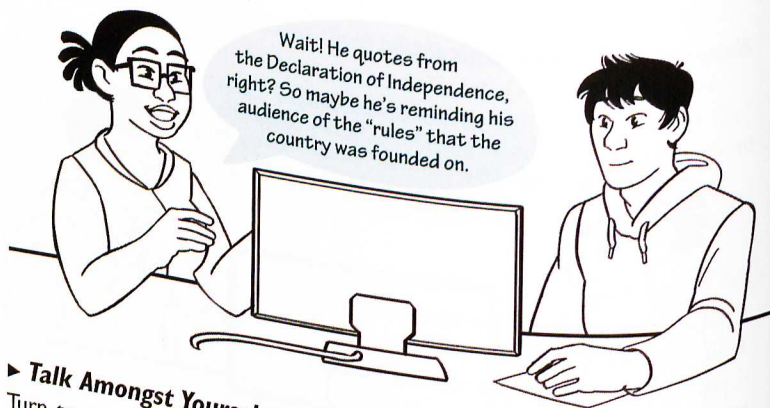
Right. But location helped. Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was in the North, and the people there were probably tired of war, too.



The method he used was smart: he delivered a speech, in person. People could see him as a human being. Also, it's really short. People wouldn't need long to get the message.

What's left? Hmm. The institutional rules...





► **Talk Amongst Yourselves . . .**

Turn to page 483 and read the Gettysburg Address. Then find a partner and critique Casey and Mara's analysis. What would you change? What is missing? What do you disagree with, and why?

► **Now You Try: Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation**

We're so excited about the rhetorical analysis of President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address — nice job, Mara and Casey! — that we'd like you to take a look at another speech in order to examine the argument's context and evaluate the effect of the point of attack.

Here's your assignment: Watch or listen to one of the following speeches:

- "Amazing Grace," the Clementa Pinckney eulogy by President Barack Obama
- "This Is Water," the 2005 Kenyon College commencement address by David Foster Wallace

Each speech is easily found on YouTube, but make sure you find a video of the entire speech and not just an excerpt: Obama's speech is about ten minutes long, while Wallace's is about twenty-two minutes long. Both speeches are worth every second of your time.

As you're watching and listening, pay attention to the elements of the rhetorical situation. Specifically, see if you can answer the following questions, and then use your answers to provide a framework within which you can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the speech.

- What is the exigence? In other words, what compels the speaker to speak?
- Who is involved in the exigence? What are their roles?
- What are the relationships/power dynamics between the speaker and others involved?

- ▶ Where and when was the speech delivered?
- ▶ Who is the speaker? What do you know about him that is relevant to the context of the text?
- ▶ Who is the intended audience? Is it the same as the actual audience?
- ▶ What can you say about the speaker's methods of communication?
- ▶ What can you say about the institutions governing all of the above?

Audience Awareness in College Writing

In the examples and assignments above, we have explored the rhetorical situation of public, professional texts. When writers and speakers like Abraham Lincoln, Barack Obama, and David Foster Wallace create their texts, they need to spend quality time thinking about their audience. Successful writers always need to think about their readers in order to communicate their messages clearly and engagingly.

So how does a writer think about the reader? Who is the reader, anyway? How can a writer ever really know who's reading his or her ideas? These questions were especially challenging for Lincoln and Obama, who were addressing large and diverse audiences, but perhaps less of a challenge for Wallace, who was addressing the graduating class of Kenyon College — a much smaller audience than that of Lincoln or Obama (whose audiences were the American people).

If the idea of figuring out who your audience is seems daunting, well, it is. But there's good news. As a college writer, you may sometimes be assigned to write for a specific audience — for example, you may be asked to write a proposal for your college administration or city council to consider — but even when no particular audience is identified, your reader is, in reality, fairly well defined. In general terms, your audience is made up of your classmates — assuming you share your work through peer review or other collaborative learning activities. But in specific terms, your reader is always your professor. Does that mean that you need to know everything about your professor? No.



I certainly *hope* not.
That would be weird.

But you *do* know plenty of important things about your reader. You know that your reader values the subject matter you've been assigned to write about, and also that your reader is most likely fairly well informed about your

writing topic, even when you've been allowed to choose your own. These may seem like simple things to know — and they are — but that simplicity doesn't diminish their importance.

You've heard people talk about college in comparison to the “real world,” right? We happen to think college *is* the real world, but at the same time, we understand why some people might make a distinction between the two. When it comes to writing for an audience, college is a controlled environment. You won't need to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out *who* your reader is because your readership has been determined for you. So instead you can spend your time figuring out how best to address that reader.

APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW . . . RIGHT NOW

You can apply what you're learning about the writing process, context, and the rhetorical situation — the fundamentals of good writing — to your academic life right now. Don't worry about not being an expert yet. We'll get to that very soon.

For now, even if it's early in the term, you may already have a writing assignment in one of your classes. Using the *Reality Check!* below — as well as all the information in this chapter — figure out the rhetorical situation of your writing assignment. Then get together with a partner or a small group to talk about what you've discovered.

You can do this exercise on your own — just 'cause. It's a super handy way to understand assignments for any class, for your entire college career, and maybe in your life beyond college!



Reality Check! The Rhetorical Situation

1. What is the exigence? In other words, what compels you to write?
2. Who is involved in the exigence? What are their roles?
3. What are the relationships/power dynamics between you and others involved?
4. Where and when are you creating your writing?
5. Who are you in relation to the context of your writing?
6. Who is your intended audience? Is it the same as your actual audience?
7. What decisions will you make regarding methods of communication?
8. What can you say about the institutions governing all of the above?

Reading and Writing: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The more that you read, the more things you'll know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.

—Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss)

Readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic: the three Rs are what we learn in grade school, and for good reason — they're absolutely crucial skills to have in order to be educated. *But why are they crucial*, you ask?

Because they're all variations on the one skill that's so important we sometimes forget to mention it: thinking.

That's right: reading and writing and arithmetic are simply different manifestations of the act of thinking, which is something all intelligent people should do as often as possible. In this book, we'll focus on the first two skills, giving special emphasis to the second one (writing). In other words, we'll be talking about the two *verbal* aspects — as opposed to the *numerical* aspect — of thinking.

Fun fact:
Verbal doesn't mean "spoken." It means "using words." So it can refer to either speaking or writing. Most people don't know that. But now you do.



The Reading-Writing Relationship

Let's pause for a second and think about this: reading and writing are the two varieties of textual communication. How do they differ? Well, reading is perceptive (we perceive it) and receptive (we receive it), whereas writing is active (we make it) and creative (we generate ideas). When we read, we perceive a text and receive its meaning. When we write, we act on ideas and create a text.

Perhaps this sounds so simple that you're asking yourself, *Why are they bothering to tell me this?* We bother because we care about you, but also because it's impossible to talk about writing — which means it's impossible to *teach* writing — without talking about reading. The two activities, reading and writing, can't exist

A
r
w

n
c
a
t

Prewriting: Where on Earth Do I Begin?

If you believe you can accomplish everything by “cramming” at the eleventh hour, by all means, don’t lift a finger now. But you may think twice about beginning to build your ark once it has already started raining.

— Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide*

In Chapter 1, we told you that writing is a process, and we provided you with some advice and a few examples. Now it’s time to walk you through some of the steps involved in the very first stage of the writing process: prewriting.

The Intellectual Road Trip

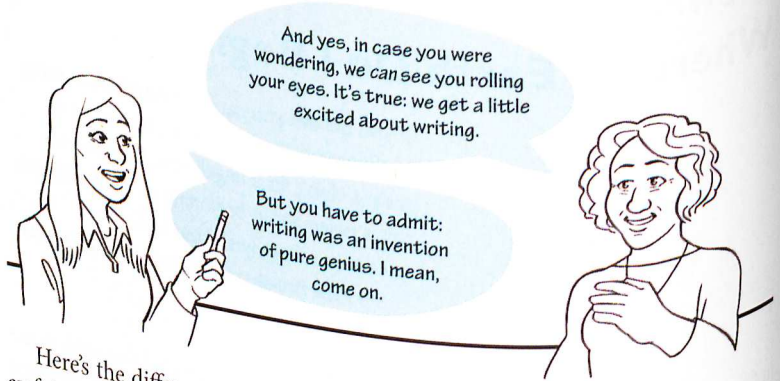
In many ways, writing is a journey: a stroll out of the darkness and into the light, a trip from ignorance to wisdom, a strenuous hike up Knowledge Mountain — okay, we’ll stop now. But you get the point: writing is a journey.

And why do you take that journey, that intellectual road trip — aside from the fact that you’re enrolled in all these college classes with professors who expect you to write, that is? Why do any of us take that journey? We take it because humans are hardwired to *impose order on chaos*. The world around us is chaotic on any given Monday morning, right? And don’t even get us started on Friday nights. Yes, the world is chaos — and as humans we are uniquely equipped to do two things in response to that chaos:

1. We notice it.
2. We try to make sense of it.

And this is where the journey of writing comes in. See, the tool we need to use to make sense of the chaos is the human brain — that amazing bit of evolutionary magic that just keeps getting bigger and more sophisticated over time, so that we’re capable of noticing and attempting to understand increasingly complex examples of chaos. What our amazing brains cannot do, however, is retain every thought we’ve ever had. So several millennia ago we used our brains to develop a system that allows us to retain our thoughts *outside* of our brains, a system that allows for

the observable, storable manifestation of thought: writing. Writing enables us to keep track of our thoughts and insights in the hope that we might convince others of their relevance.



Here's the difference between good writers and those who moan about how awful their writing is: good writers master a series of learnable skills that begins with something that actually *isn't* writing. That's right: a good writer will begin *not* by picking up a pen or sitting at a keyboard but by thinking.

Okay, you say. *What should I think about?*
We're glad you asked.

Understanding the Assignment

The first thing you need to do when you find yourself with a new writing assignment — the *very first* thing — is to understand the assignment. That is, you need to make sure you comprehend everything there is to know about the task you've been given before you start working on it. We sometimes refer to this stage in the writing process as **analyzing the writing situation**.

KNOW WHAT YOU ARE REQUIRED TO DO

As with most things worth knowing in life, understanding an assignment begins with you asking yourself a bunch of pertinent questions and paying attention to whether you actually know the answers.

Reality Check! Understanding the Assignment

1. What sort of text have you been asked to write? Is it a personal reflection essay? A letter? A report? A story? An argument?

2. Are there words in the assignment that give you a hint about what the ultimate purpose of the writing is? Note that words such as *explain* and *inform* are asking you to do something very different from what words like *evaluate* or *propose* are asking you to do. You can read much more about these distinctions in Chapter 16.
3. Has your specific, narrowed topic been assigned, or are you expected to find one yourself?
4. Are you supposed to offer your opinion, stick to a presentation of facts, or perhaps do both?
5. Have you been given a specific job to do in the text, like solving a problem or comparing two topics? These specific jobs, also known as “rhetorical modes,” are discussed in detail in Chapter 11.
6. Are you required to do research? If so, do you know what kind or how much? And if you’re *not* required to do research, are you still *allowed* to do research?
7. How long does the assignment say the text should be? Is this length a requirement or a suggestion?
8. How formal should the text be? What do you need to know about formatting issues?
9. What do you need to know about audience awareness and tone? Who’s going to read this once you’re done? Is there an intended audience beyond, or in addition to, your professor and/or classmates? You can read more about audience and tone in Chapters 11, 21, and 22.
10. When is it due? Are you required to submit work (notes, outlines, drafts) along the way to creating the final product? If not *required*, is the submission of these things for feedback invited or encouraged?

ASK QUESTIONS

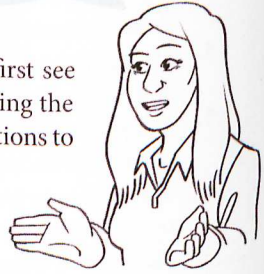
If you’re fortunate, your professor has given you a written assignment that should answer most of these questions. If the assignment is given orally, or if the written assignment doesn’t provide clear answers to these questions, ask your professor to explain. Yes, even if you’re shy. It’s better to ask a potentially silly question than to spend hours writing something that ultimately doesn’t fulfill the assignment. Adopting a conscientious approach to the terms of the assignment — whether those terms are presented in thoroughly articulated written instructions or determined through thoughtful questioning of your professor —

is the first, best way to ensure your eventual success in completing the writing project.

We highly recommend that you begin every writing assignment throughout your college career by going through each of the questions above: first see how many you can answer on your own simply by reading the instructions carefully, and then take any remaining questions to your professor for clarification.

One question that probably won't be answered explicitly within the assignment guidelines is: what are the reader's expectations with respect to the values, qualities, and traditions of writing in this particular field? Much of this book is devoted to answering that question when it comes to English classes — and we've included a section (Appendix B) that provides a brief overview of what professors in other subject areas expect — but the best way to answer it for yourself is to be an active participant in class: read, listen, ask questions . . . in short, learn how to write for the situation.

It's a good idea to treat a suggested length as a requirement — but one that you can sidestep if you have a really good reason.



WHEN IS IT DUE?

Before we move on, we'd like to say just a few words about the last question in the *Reality Check!* box on page 51: *When is it due?*

We've had students who think we're kidding when we include this question as a part of the prewriting process, but we're not. It's an important question — not just because you should remember to turn your writing in on time, but because you should start working on it early enough to do a good job.

The number one cause of bad student writing is a failure to devote sufficient time to prewriting.



If you know your deadline, then you can reverse-engineer your finished product: start with the due date, figure out the steps you will need to take to create the final draft, and then work backwards, setting deadlines that will allow you to meet your goal. In addition to setting aside a chunk of time for the actual drafting (which we'll discuss in Chapter 8), be sure to allow plenty of time for prewriting (addressed in the activities throughout Part 2) as well as for revision (discussed in Chapters 12–15).

► **Let Us Show You: Understanding the Assignment**

It's time for the first writing assignment in Casey's Freshman Year Experience class:

CASEY'S ASSIGNMENT: FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE (FYE)

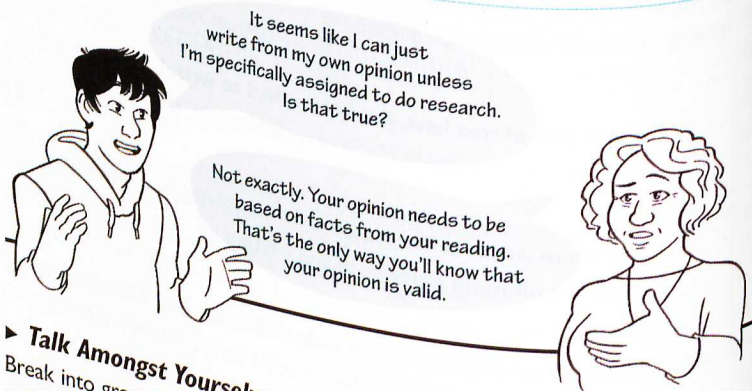
Choose any of the fourteen examples of "prohibited conduct" in the Code of Conduct section of the college's student handbook, and write a brief essay (around three pages) that demonstrates your understanding of the rule as well as your opinion of its value and effectiveness. Due on the day of the midterm exam.

Being a good student — by which we simply mean one who understands that a student's job is to learn — Casey immediately springs into action, going through the list of Understanding the Assignment questions in the *Reality Check!* on pages 50–51. He gets through the first several questions fairly easily before running into some trouble with question 6:

- 1. What sort of text have you been asked to write?** That's easy! A personal reflection. The words "your understanding" and "your opinion" are the clues.
- 2. Are there words in the assignment that give you a hint about what the ultimate purpose of the writing is?** Yup, as noted above. Moving on!
- 3. Has your specific topic been assigned, or are you expected to find one yourself?** Well, I've been given a list of fourteen possible topics, so that narrows it down a bit.
- 4. Are you supposed to offer your opinion, stick to a presentation of facts, or perhaps do both?** Hmm, I'd say that "understanding" sounds as if what I write should be based on facts, while "opinion" sounds like I get to say what I think.
- 5. Have you been given a specific job to do in the text, like solving a problem or comparing two topics?** Two specific jobs, I think: to show that I understand, and to explain my opinion.
- 6. Are you required to do research?** I have no idea. Uh-oh.

(continued)

7. **How long does the assignment say the text should be?** About three pages. It's just a suggestion, but I know I should treat it like a requirement because that's what the ace students do.
8. **How formal should the text be?** I'd say medium-formal. It's academic writing, but it's also a personal reflection.
9. **What do you need to know about audience awareness and tone?** I think my audience will be the professor and maybe my classmates, so my tone should appeal to them.
10. **When is it due? Are you required to submit work (notes, outlines, drafts) along the way?** It's due at the midterm exam, which gives me plenty of time to get it done, and I don't think I have to turn in any of my work except the essay itself.



► **Talk Amongst Yourselves . . .**

Break into groups and discuss Casey's initial response to the assignment. How well has he understood it? What steps has he missed? What would you add to his process of understanding the assignment?

► **Now You Try: Understanding the Assignment**

Take a look around your workspace — your desk, your kitchen table, or wherever it is that you keep all of your schoolwork. Do you notice any writing assignments lying about? You should first look for an assignment from an English class, but you can also use an assignment from your Freshman Year Experience class or your history class. If by some chance you don't have a writing assignment handy, feel free to use the *Practice!* assignment on the next page.

Practice! Understanding the Assignment

Your task is to write a very brief essay (one to two pages) that responds to the following prompt: If you could somehow become, for one day, any character in any movie you've ever seen, who would you choose to be? Why? Due three days from now.

For whichever assignment you choose, try your hardest to answer the questions on pages 50–51. If you have trouble answering any of the questions, remember that your professor is the best person to ask for help. We think you'll find that answering these questions — or a similar set of questions that suits you better while still improving your understanding of the assignment — will give you a sense of confidence (even courage!) about moving forward with the next step in your prewriting process.

Generating Ideas

Okay, so you've come up with reasonably accurate answers to the ten questions presented earlier and have therefore figured out what your assigned task is. What's next? This paper's not going to just write itself, is it? The first thing you're going to need, now that you have a clear sense of your assignment, is a set of ideas.

Ideas? you say. Those are exactly the problem! Where do I get some?

BRAINSTORMING

If it were us — and it often is! — we'd start by brainstorming. Why? Well, primarily because most people can't just sit down and spit out great ideas. Generating ideas is hard work, and brainstorming is a terrific tool that will help you get the work done. Brainstorming is an activity that manifests itself in different ways, each with its own nickname: *listing*, *mind mapping*, and *clustering*, for example. If we were assigned to write an essay about — oh, let's say, the role of technology in daily life, we might make use of one or more of these techniques to generate some initial ideas for writing.

Listing is exactly what it sounds like: making a list of ideas as they occur to

Listing

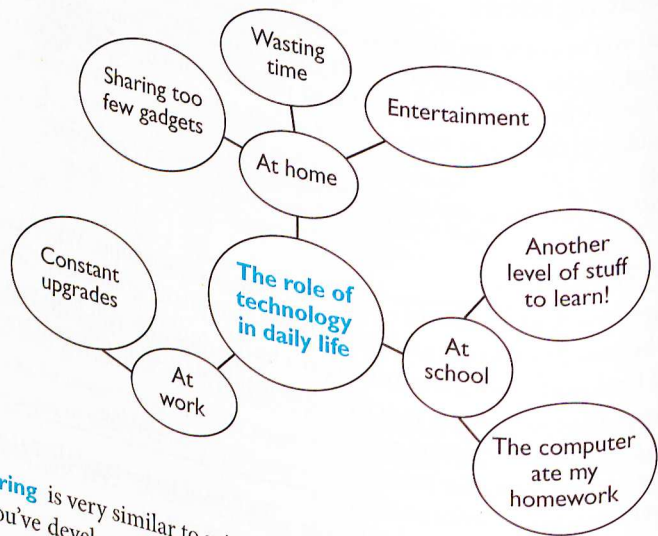
The Role of Technology in Daily Life

- at work
- at home
- at school
- for entertainment
- problems with technology
- dependence on technology
- constant upgrading

you while you're thinking about your assignment. Note that it's helpful to summarize your assignment in a title at the top of your list, to remind yourself of the task so you don't get off track. Listing is a great way to increase the options that you'll have to choose from when you settle on a topic at the end of your brainstorming. But it typically doesn't do much to help you generate a fresh, new idea.

Mind Mapping is a bit more useful when you need to zero in on a fairly precise or specific topic. It takes the basic idea of listing, but rather than simply writing down words or phrases as they occur to you in relation to the assignment, you start by writing the main idea of the assignment in the middle of a space that will represent your thought process. As each specific idea occurs to you, you connect it to your main idea by drawing a line — and you connect subsequent, more specific ideas to the ideas that prompted them. In this way, you are creating a trail of mental breadcrumbs that eventually will reveal some interesting connections between and among ideas.

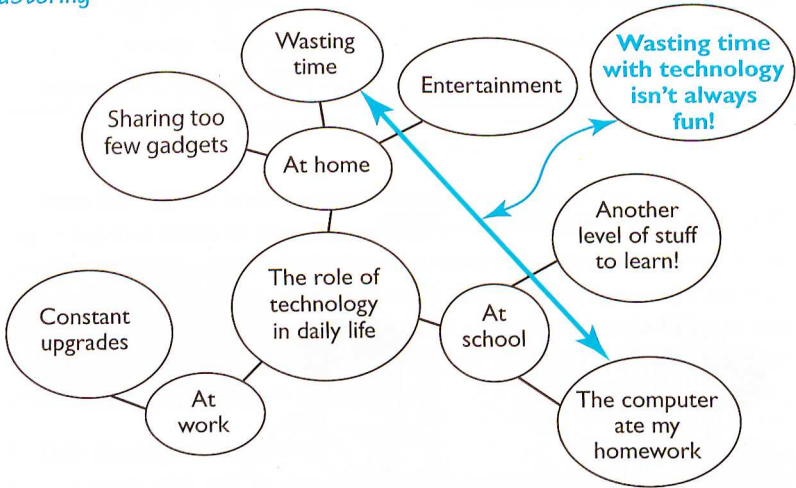
Mind Mapping



Clustering is very similar to mind mapping but takes the process a step further: once you've developed your mind map, you examine its outer edges (where the most specific ideas are presented) to see whether there are interesting connections between ideas that at first don't seem related to each other. For example, if you let your eyes wander over the ideas linked by circles and lines in the mind map

above, you might come to the realization that the computer really *does* eat your homework sometimes, which makes for a colossal waste of time — and thus a potentially interesting new idea is born: the relationship between computer glitches and wasted time.

Clustering



Although the specific techniques for each brainstorming strategy differ, the essential activity is the same each time: use a pencil or pen or a keyboard to scribble or jot or sketch or type some combination of words, images, and diagrams that will help you blow the dust out of your brain and shake loose a few potential starting points. You can think of it as **generative freewriting** — writing freely to generate an idea (or many ideas).

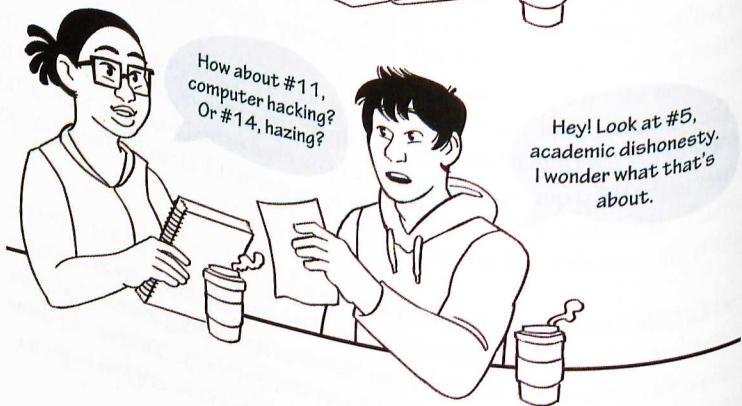
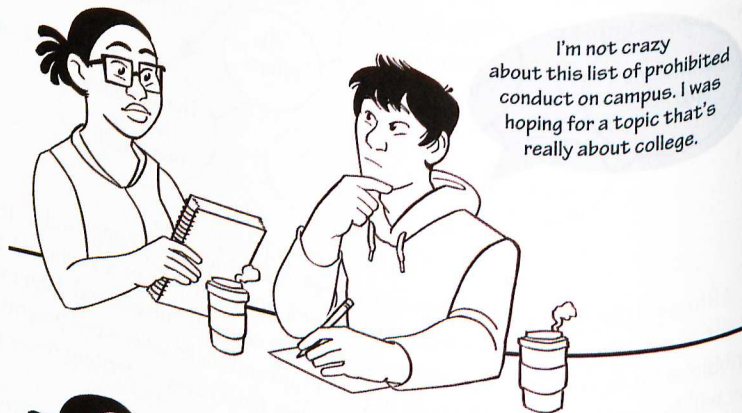
The initial focus of your brainstorming activity will depend on your answers to some of the ten Understanding the Assignment questions — for example, if the answer to the third question indicates that you need to find your own topic within a broadly defined territory, then your first brainstorm will almost certainly involve identifying a suitable and promising topic.

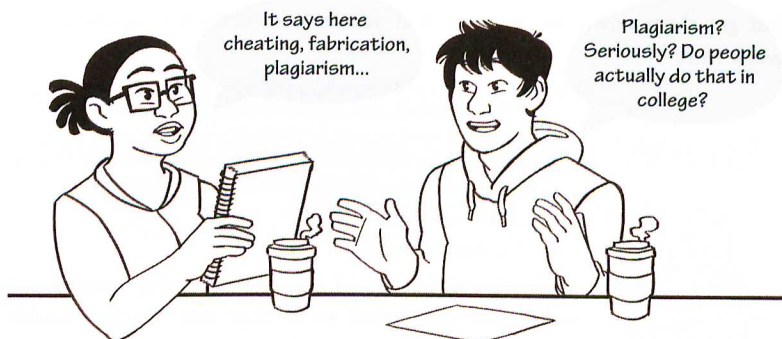
► **Let Us Show You: Brainstorming**

Casey is in precisely the situation described above: there are plenty of topics he could write about for the Freshman Year Experience assignment — fourteen topics, in fact — and so his immediate task is to list the possibilities and think them through in an effort to identify where a new or interesting idea might be.

Prohibited Conduct

1. smoking
2. drinking
3. use of controlled substances
4. lewd or obscene behavior
5. academic dishonesty
6. forgery
7. theft
8. vandalism
9. firearms possession
10. false alarms
11. computer hacking
12. sexual harassment
13. disorderly/abusive conduct
14. hazing

Brainstorming Possible Essay Topics



Note that Casey's brainstorming process begins with an old standby — listing — but then seems to take place without writing — that is, he brainstorms by thinking and talking about the assignment rather than through drawing, scribbling, or note taking. Some people can work well this way: they make a list, read it, think about it, and make a decision. But not everyone is equally suited to this style of learning, and relatively few people are at their most effective when they're keeping everything in their heads.

► **Talk Amongst Yourselves . . .**

Form a group with two or three of your classmates, and talk with them about your preferred ways to generate ideas. You might start by looking through your class notes or the notes you've taken for a writing assignment.

Are your notes made entirely of words, or do you draw or doodle as well? Do you make diagrams? Bullet lists? Do you circle certain things and put stars next to others? Do you draw arrows between ideas? Are your notes minimalist — that is, do you jot down individual words and expect yourself to remember what they mean? Or do you make more complete notes to ensure that you'll understand them later?

As you and your classmates compare and contrast brainstorming techniques, try to be mindful of how their processes differ from yours — and see if you can steal at least one good idea that you've never tried before.

► **Now You Try: Brainstorming**

Go back to the assignment that we started on page 54 and use one of the brainstorming techniques described earlier in the chapter — listing, mind mapping, or clustering — to generate a collection of ideas that will give you some options to pursue. Don't worry yet about which ideas are better than others. Your task at this point is not to *judge* your ideas but to *collect* them. This is also a chance to practice flexible thinking: don't worry if your ideas don't sound smart yet.

Just get them down on paper so that you have something — anything — to work with.



The first known usage of *brainstorm* — a very cool word — was in 1849. It's a metaphor. After all, you don't have a *real* storm in your brain. But a brainstorm is essentially a chaotic swirl of ideas. Go with it.

During this process, if one brainstorming method isn't working for you, switch to another one. Practice flexible thinking here. If listing doesn't work, try mind mapping. If drawing a mind map doesn't do it for you, talk about your ideas aloud, whether to yourself or to a patient and understanding friend. It's important that you make the brainstorming process a system of idea generation that works for you.

Remember, all you're doing at this point is generating some ideas, some thoughts, some tidbits of content. Don't expect too much for now — there will be plenty of time later for crafting your ideas into the fully formed, rational sentences that you'll eventually share with your reader. Right now, you're just gathering possible ideas for yourself.

Reality Check! Where to Begin

- ▶ Understand the type of assignment you've been given.
- ▶ Know whether you will choose a specific topic or whether one has been given to you.
- ▶ Make sure you know the due date, required length, and other logistical elements of the assignment.
- ▶ Brainstorm for appropriate and interesting ways to approach your assignment.
- ▶ Be aware of your own preferred learning style as you brainstorm.