The Method: Working with Patterns of Repetition and Contrast

The Method is our shorthand for a systematic procedure for analyzing evidence by looking for patterns of repetition and contrast. It differs from other tools we have been offering in being more comprehensive. Whereas Notice and Focus and 10 on 1 cut through a wealth of data to focus on individual details, The Method goes for the whole picture, involving methodical application of a matrix or grid of observational moves upon a subject. Although these are separate moves, they also work together and build cumulatively to the discovery of an infrastructure, a blueprint of the whole.

Here is the procedure in its most pared-down form:

- What repeats?
- What goes with what?
- What is opposed to what?
- What doesn’t fit?
- And for any of these, so what?

As you can see, these are the steps that we first presented as Move 4, Look for Patterns, in the Five Analytical Moves of Chapter 1. Now we are returning to this move in more elaborate form.

Before laying out these steps more precisely, we want first to mention that The Method can be applied to virtually anything you wish to analyze—an essay, a political campaign, a work of visual or verbal art, a dense passage from some secondary source that you feel to be important but can’t quite figure out, and, last but not least, your own writing. It may be helpful to think of this method of analysis as a form of mental doo-dling, one that encourages the attitude of negative capability we spoke of in Chapter 2. Rather than worrying about what you are going to say, or about whether you understand, you instead get out a pencil and start tallying up what you see. Engaged in this process, you’ll soon find yourself gaining entry to the logic of your subject matter.

The method of looking for patterns works through a series of steps. Hold yourself initially to doing the steps one at a time and in order. Later, you will be able to record your answers under each of the three steps simultaneously. Although the steps of The Method are discrete and modular, they are also consecutive. They proceed by a kind of narrative logic. Each step leads logically to the next, and then to various kinds of regrouping, which is actually rethinking. (Note: we have divided into two kinds of repetition, exact and similar, what was one step in the Five Analytical Moves.)

**Step 1.** Locate exact repetitions—identical or nearly identical words or details—and note the number of times each repeats.

For example, if the word *seems* repeats three times, write “seems × 3.” Consider different forms of the same word—*seemed, seem*—as exact repetitions. Similarly, if
you are working with images rather than words, the repeated appearance of high foreheads would constitute an exact repetition.

Concentrate on substantive (meaning-carrying) words. Only in rare cases do words like “and” or “the” merit attention as a significant repetition. If you are working with a longer text, such as an essay or book chapter or short story, limit yourself to recording the half-dozen or so words that call attention to themselves through repetition.

**Step 2.** Locate repetitions of the same or similar kind of detail or word—which we call strands—and name the connecting logic. (For example, polite, courteous, mannerly and accuse, defense, justice, witness are strands.)

Simply listing the various strands that you find in your evidence goes a long way toward helping you discover what is most interesting and important for you to address. But to use the discovery of strands as an analytical tool, you have to do more than list. You have to name the common denominators that make the words or details in your list identifiable as a strand. Naming and renaming your strands will trigger ideas; it is itself an analytical move. And again, when working with longer pieces, try to locate the half-dozen strands that seem to you most important.

**Step 3.** Locate details or words that form or suggest binary oppositions, and select from these the most important ones, which function as organizing contrasts. Sometimes patterns of repetition that you begin to notice in a particular subject matter are significant because they are part of a contrast—a basic opposition—around which the subject matter is structured. To find these oppositions, ask yourself, What is opposed to what?

When looking for binary oppositions, start with what’s on the page. List words or details that are opposed to other words or details. Note that often these oppositions are not obvious; you need to become aware of what is repeatedly there and then ask yourself, is something opposed to this? And often the oppositions that you discover are not actual words in a text but implied meanings. For example, images of rocks and water might suggest the binary permanence/impermanence or unchanging/changing.

This process of constructing binary oppositions from the data usually leads you to discover what we call organizing contrasts. An organizing contrast is a central binary, one that reveals the central issues and concerns in the material you are studying and also provides—like the structural beam in a building—its unifying shape. Some examples that we encounter frequently are nature/civilization, city/country, public/private, organic/inorganic, and voluntary/involuntary.

**Step 4.** Rank the data within your lists to isolate what you take to be the most important repetitions, strands, and binaries. Then write a paragraph—half a page or so—in which you explain your choice of one repetition or one strand or one binary as central to understanding whatever you have been observing. Ranking your data in terms of its importance is a means of moving toward interpretive leaps. Your most important binaries might be a pair of opposed terms and/or ideas, but each might also be a strand that is opposed to another strand.
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Step 5. Search for anomalies—data that do not seem to fit any of the dominant patterns.
We have made this the last step because anomalies often become evident only after you have begun to discern a pattern, so it is best to locate repetitions, strands, and organizing contrasts—things that fit together in some way—before looking for things that seem not to fit. Once you see an anomaly, you will often find that it is part of a strand you had not detected (and perhaps one side of a previously unseen binary). In this respect, looking for anomalies encourages defamiliarizing—it’s great for shaking yourself out of potentially limited ways of looking at your evidence and getting you to consider other possible interpretations.

Thinking Recursively with Strands and Binaries

Applying The Method has the effect of inducing you to get physical with the data—literally, for you will probably find yourself circling, underlining, and listing. Although you will thus descend from the heights of abstraction to the realm of concrete detail, the point of tallying repetitions and strands and binaries and then selecting the most important and interesting ones is to trigger ideas. The discipline required to notice patterns in the language produces more specific, more carefully grounded conclusions than you otherwise might produce.

You should expect ideas to suggest themselves to you as you move through the mechanical steps of The Method. The active thinking often takes place as you are grouping and regrouping. As you start listing, you will find that strands begin to suggest other strands that are in opposition to them. And you may find that words you first took to be parts of a single strand are actually parts of different strands and are, perhaps, in opposition. This process of noticing and then relocating words and details into different patterns is one aspect of using The Method that can push your analysis to interpretation.

To some extent using The Method is archaeological. It digs into the language or the material details of whatever you are analyzing in order to unearth its thinking. This is most evident in the discovery of organizing contrasts. Binary oppositions often indicate places where there is struggle among various points of view. And there is usually no single “right” answer about which of a number of binaries is the primary organizing contrast. One of the best ways to develop your analyses is to reformulate binaries, trying on different possible oppositions as the primary one. (For more on using binaries analytically, see Chapter 5, Analyzing Arguments.)

Thus far we have been talking about The Method as a grid for viewing other people’s finished work. The Method also describes the processes by which writers, artists, scientists, and all manner of thinkers create those works in the first place. Much of the thinking that we do as we write and read happens through a process of association, which is, by its very nature, repetitive. In associative thinking, thoughts develop as words and details, which suggest other words and details that are like them. Thinking moves not just forward in a straight line, but sideways and in circles. We repeatedly make connections; we figure out what goes with what and what is opposed to what. In this sense, writing (making something out of words) and reading (arriving at an understanding of someone else’s words) operate in much the same way.
Generating Ideas with The Method: An Example

See how the thinking in the following paragraph moves because the writer is noting strands and binaries. First he notes the differences in two kinds of fashion ads aimed at men. There are the high-fashion ads and the Dockers ads. In the first of these, the word beautiful repeats twice as part of a strand (including gorgeous, interesting, supermodel, demure). The writer then poses traits of the Dockers ads as an opposing strand. Instead of a beautiful face there is no face, instead of “gorgeous outfit,” the author says “it’s tough to concentrate on the clothes.” These oppositions cause the writer to make his interpretive leap, that the Dockers ads “weren’t primarily concerned with clothes at all” and that this was intentional.

The most striking aspect of the spots is how different they are from typical fashion advertising. If you look at men’s fashion magazines, for example, at the advertisements for the suits of Ralph Lauren or Valentino or Hugo Boss, they almost always consist of a beautiful man, with something interesting done to his hair, wearing a gorgeous outfit. At the most, the man may be gesturing discreetly, or smiling in the demure way that a man like that might smile after, say, telling the supermodel at the next table no thanks he has to catch an early-morning flight to Milan. But that’s all. The beautiful face and the clothes tell the whole story. The Dockers ads, though, are almost exactly the opposite. There’s no face. The camera is jumping around so much that it’s tough to concentrate on the clothes. And instead of stark simplicity, the fashion image is overlaid with a constant, confusing patter. It’s almost as if the Dockers ads weren’t primarily concerned with clothes at all—and in fact that’s exactly what Levi’s intended. What the company had discovered, in its research, was that baby-boomer men felt that the chief thing missing from their lives was male friendship. Caught between the demands of the families that many of them had started in the eighties and career considerations that had grown more onerous, they felt they had lost touch with other men. The purpose of the ads—the chatter, the lounging around, the quick cuts—was simply to conjure up a place where men could put on one-hundred-percent-cotton khakis and reconnect with one another. In the original advertising brief, that imaginary place was dubbed Dockers World.

—Malcolm Gladwell, “Listening to Khakis”

Doing The Method on a Poem: Our Analysis

Here is an example of how one might do The Method on a piece of text—in this case, a student poem. You might try it yourself first, using our version to check against your own.