# BRIEF CONTENTS

## UNIT I THE ANALYTICAL FRAME OF MIND: INTRODUCTION TO ANALYTICAL METHODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Analysis: What It Is and What It Does</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Counterproductive Habits of Mind</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Toolkit of Analytical Methods</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Interpretation: What It Is, What It Isn’t, and How to Do It</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Analyzing Arguments</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Topics and Modes of Analysis</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## UNIT II WRITING THE ANALYTICAL ESSAY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What Evidence Is and How It Works</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Using Evidence to Build a Paper: 10 on 1 versus 1 on 10</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Making a Thesis Evolve</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Structuring the Paper: Forms and Formats</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Introductions and Conclusions</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Recognizing and Fixing Weak Thesis Statements</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3

A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

Once I begin the act of writing, it all falls away—the view from the window, the tools, the talismans, even the snoring cat—and I am unconscious of myself and my surroundings while I fuse language with idea, make a specific image visible or audible through the discovery of the right words . . . One’s carping inner critics are silenced for a time, and, as a result, what is produced is a little bit different from anything I had planned. There is always a surprise, a revelation. During the act of writing I have told myself something that I didn’t know I knew.

—Gail Godwin, “How I Write” (Boston: The Writer, October 1987)

In a recent (and fascinating) bestseller entitled Blink, Malcolm Gladwell offers an exploration into intuitive knowing. Gladwell ultimately argues that there is a big difference between experts who make decisions in the blink of an eye and relative novices (people outside their area of expertise) who do so. He finds that although both novices and experts can make intuitive decisions based on rapid assessment of key details (a process he calls thin slicing), the accuracy and quality of these decisions is incomparably better in thinkers who have trained their habits of perception.

This chapter offers a set of procedures—tools—for training your habits of perception, especially those habits that allow you to see significant detail. The tools are presented as formulae that you can apply to anything you wish to better understand. We have deliberately given each of the tools a name and nameable steps so that they are easy to invoke consciously in place of the semi-conscious glide into such habits as overgeneralizing and the judgment reflex. (See Chapter 2, Counterproductive Habits of Mind, for more.)

Most of the items in the Toolkit share the trait of encouraging defamiliarization. In the last chapter we spoke of the necessity of defamiliarizing—of finding ways to see things that the veneer of familiarity would otherwise render invisible. This involves recognizing that the apparently self-evident meanings of things seem “natural” and “given” only because we have been conditioned to see them this way.

Most of us assume, for example, that the media is a site of public knowledge and awareness. But look what happens to that idea when defamiliarized by Jonathan Franzen in a recent essay (“Imperial Bedroom”):
Since really serious exposure in public today is assumed to be synonymous with being seen on television, it would seem to follow that televised space is the premier public space. Many things that people say to me on television, however, would never be tolerated in a genuine public space—in a jury box, for example, or even on a city sidewalk. TV is an enormous, ramified extension of the billion living rooms and bedrooms in which it’s consumed. You rarely hear a person on the subway talking loudly about, say, incontinence, but on television it’s been happening for years. TV is devoid of shame, and without shame there can be no distinction between public and private.

Franzen here enables us to see freshly by offering us details that challenge our conventional notions of public and private. Seeing in this way requires that we attend carefully to the concrete aspect of things.

We admit that in some cases it is the fear of the unfamiliar rather than the blindness bred of habit that keeps people from looking closely at things. Such is the situation of college students confronted with difficult and unfamiliar reading. And so, there is clearly some value in using habit to domesticate the unfamiliar in particular (and daunting) circumstances. Nevertheless, it’s probably easier to overcome the fear of grappling with new material than it is to turn off the notion that meanings are obvious. (On strategies for tackling difficult reading, see the discussions of Paraphrase × 3 and Passage-Based Focused Freewriting later in this chapter. See also Chapter 13, Reading Analytically.)

Before introducing the Toolkit, we should say that what we are proposing is (in a sense) nothing new. There is a long history dating back to the ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians of using formulae to discover and develop ideas. In classical rhetoric, the pursuit and presentation of ideas—of workable claims for arguments—was divided into five stages: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio*. For present purposes we need to concentrate on only two—*inventio* (invention) and *dispositio* (disposition). Disposition includes the various means of effectively organizing a speech or piece of writing, given that rhetoric is concerned with the means of persuasion. Invention includes various ways of finding things to say, of discovering arguable claims to develop and dispose (arrange).

The early rhetoricians thought of invention in terms of what they called “topics,” from the Greek word *topoi*, meaning place or region. The topics were “places” that an orator (speech-maker) could visit, mentally, to discover possible ways of developing a subject. The topics are what we might now think of as strategies—a word which, interestingly, has its roots in the Greek word for army, and, thus, with the idea of winning over an audience to your point of view and defeating enemies. Because the quality and plausibility of a writer’s ideas constitute, arguably, the best means of persuading an audience, we here emphasize ways of discovering as much as possible about your evidence.

**THE TOOLKIT**

What follows are a set of fundamental analytical activities—tools that effective thinkers use constantly, whether they are aware of using them or not. Some people do indeed have ideas as sudden flashes of inspiration (in the blink of an eye), but there
is method even in such seemingly intuitive leaps. And when the sudden flashes of inspiration don’t come, method is even more essential.

One trick to becoming a better observer and thus a better thinker is to slow down, to stop trying to draw conclusions before you’ve spent time openly attending to the data, letting yourself notice more. Better ideas grow out of a richer acquaintance with whatever it is you are looking at. Observation and interpretation go hand in hand, but it helps greatly to allow yourself a distinct observation stage and to prolong this beyond what most people find comfortable. All of the activities in the Toolkit seek to create such a stage. The Toolkit will also help you to stave off anxiety about assimilating difficult material by giving you something concrete to do with it, rather than expecting yourself to leap instantly to understanding.

The activities in the Toolkit can be conducted either orally or in writing and should be practiced again and again, until they become habitual. The activities themselves do not produce ready-made papers, and may in fact produce an abundance of writing that never makes it through to the final draft. But the thinking these activities inspire ultimately produces much better final results.

There are, of course, more observational and idea-generating methods than we have offered here. In classical rhetoric, for example, the topics of invention include such things as the traditional rhetorical modes (comparison and contrast, classification, definition, etc.) and ways of inventorying an audience to discover things that need to be said. Our purpose in this chapter is narrower. We are concentrating on ways of looking at data—whether in print, visual, or the world—that will allow you to become more fully aware of the features that define your subject, that make it what it is. (Later chapters offer tools for other, mostly later-stage tasks such as making interpretive leaps, conversing with sources, and finding and evolving a thesis.)

**PARAPHRASE × 3**

The activity we call Paraphrase × 3 offers the quickest means of seeing how a little writing about something you’re reading can lead to having ideas about it. Paraphrasing moves toward interpretation because it tends to uncover areas of uncertainty and find questions. It instantly defamiliarizes. It also keeps your focus small so that you can practice thinking in depth rather than going for an overly broad “big picture.”

Paraphrasing is commonly misunderstood as summary (a way of shrinking material you’ve read) or perhaps as simply a way to avoid plagiarism by putting it in your own words. Too often when people wish to understand or retain information, they summarize—that is, they produce a general overview of what the words say. Paraphrasing stays much closer to the actual words than summarizing. The word paraphrase means to put one phrase next to (para) another phrase. When you paraphrase a passage, you cast and recast its key terms into near synonyms, translating it into a parallel statement. The goal of paraphrasing is to open up the possible meanings of the words; it’s a mode of inquiry.

Why is paraphrasing useful? The answer has to do with words—what they are and what we do with them. When we read, it is easy to skip quickly over the words, assuming we know what they mean. Yet when people start talking about what they mean by
particular words—the difference, for example, between assertive and aggressive or the meaning of ordinary words such as polite, realistic, or gentlemanly—they usually find less agreement than they expected. Most words mean more than one thing, and mean different things to different people.

What you say is inescapably a product of how you say it. Language doesn’t merely reflect reality; what we see as reality is shaped by the words we use. This idea is known as the constitutive theory of language. It is opposed to the so-called “transparent” theory of language, wherein it is implied that we can see through words to some meaning that exists beyond and is independent of them. When you paraphrase language, whether your own or language you encounter in your reading, you are not just defining terms but opening out the wide range of implications those words inevitably possess.

We call this activity Paraphrase 3 because usually one paraphrase is not enough. Take a sentence you want to understand better and recast it into other language three times. This will banish the problematic notion that the meaning of words is self-evident, and it will stimulate your thinking.

If you paraphrase a key passage from a reading several times, you will discover that it gets you working with the language. But you need to paraphrase slavishly. You can’t let yourself just go for the gist; replace all of the key words. The new words you are forced to come up with represent first stabs at interpretation, at having (small) ideas about what you are reading by unearthing a range of possible meanings embedded in the passage.

In practice, Paraphrase 3 has three steps:

1. Select a single sentence or phrase from whatever it is you are studying that you think is interesting, perhaps puzzling, and especially useful for understanding the material.
2. Do Paraphrase 3. Find synonyms for all of the key terms—and do this three times.
3. Reflect. What have you come to recognize about the original passage on the basis of repeated restatement?

**Try this 3.1:** Experimenting with Paraphrase × 3

Recast the substantive language of the following statements using Paraphrase × 3:

- *I am entitled to my opinion.*
- *We hold these truths to be self-evident.*
- *That’s just common sense.*

What do you come to understand about these remarks as a result of paraphrasing? Which words, for example, are most slippery (that is, difficult to define)?

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Thomas Jefferson originally wrote the words “sacred and undeniable” in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, instead of “self-evident.” So what?
Try this 3.2: *Doing Paraphrase × 3 with a Reading*

Recast the substantive language of a key sentence or short passage in something you are reading—say, a passage you find central or difficult in any of your assigned reading, the kind of passage most likely to attract yellow highlighter. Try not to make the language of your paraphrase more general than the original. This method is an excellent way to prepare for class discussion or to generate thinking about the reading that you might use in a paper. It is also, as we discuss in Unit III, a key method of analyzing the secondary sources that you draw on in your papers.

**NOTICE AND FOCUS (RANKING)**

The activity called Notice and Focus guides you to dwell longer with the data before feeling compelled to decide what the data mean. Repeatedly returning to the question, “What do you notice?” is one of the best ways to counteract the tendency to generalize too rapidly. “What do you notice?” redirects attention to the subject matter itself and delays the pressure to come up with answers.

So the first step is to repeatedly answer the question, “What do you notice?” being sure to cite actual details of the thing being observed rather than moving to more general observations about it. This phase of the exercise should produce an extended and unordered list of details—features of the thing being observed—that call attention to themselves for one reason or another.

The second step is the focusing part in which you rank (create an order of importance for) the various features of the subject that you have noticed. Answer the question “Which three details (specific features of the subject matter) are most interesting (or significant or revealing or strange)?” The purpose of relying on “interesting” or one of the other suggested words is that these will help to deactivate the like/dislike switch, which is so much a reflex in all of us, and replace it with a more analytical perspective.

The third step in this process is to say why the three things you selected struck you as the most interesting. Your attempts to answer this “why” question will trigger leaps from observation to interpretive conclusions.

Doing Notice and Focus is more difficult than it sounds. Remember to allow yourself to notice as much as you can about what you are looking at before you try to explain it. Dwell with the data (in that attitude of uncertainty we’ve recommended in Chapter 2). Record what you see. Resist moving to generalization or, worse, to judgment. The longer you allow yourself to dwell on the data, the more you will notice, and the richer your interpretation of the evidence will ultimately be.

**Prompts: Interesting and Strange**

What does it mean to find something “interesting”? Often we are interested by things that have captured our attention without our clearly knowing why. Interest and curiosity are near cousins.

The word *strange* is a useful prompt because it gives us permission to notice oddities. *Strange* invites us to defamiliarize things within our range of notice. *Strange*,
in this context, is not a judgmental term but one denoting features of a subject or situation that aren’t readily explainable. Where you locate something strange, you have something to interpret—to figure out what makes it strange and why.

Along similar lines, the words revealing and significant work by requiring you to make choices that can lead to interpretive leaps. If something strikes you as revealing or significant, even if you’re not yet sure why, you will eventually have to produce some explanation.

**Try this 3.3: Doing Notice and Focus with a Room**

Practice this activity with the room you’re in. List a number of details about it, then rank the three most important ones. Use as a focusing question any of the four words suggested above—interesting, significant, revealing or strange. Or come up with your own focus for the ranking, such as the three aspects of the room that seem most to affect the way you feel and behave in the space.

**Try this 3.4: Notice and Focus Fieldwork**

Try this exercise with a range of subjects: a photograph, a cartoon, an editorial, conversations overheard around campus, looking at people’s shoes, political speeches, and so forth. Remember to include all three steps: notice, rank and say why.

**10 ON 1**

The exercise we call 10 on 1 is a cousin of Notice and Focus—it too depends on extended observation but with more focus and usually occurring at a later stage of analysis. Notice and Focus is useful because it frees you to look at the object with no constraints or prejudgments. Notice and Focus treats your subject matter as a broad canvas to move around in. 10 on 1 promotes a more intensive and elaborate exploration of a single representative piece of evidence. 10 on 1 is built on the idea that one sure way to notice more is to narrow your scope.

The term 10 on 1 is shorthand for the principle that it is better to make ten observations or points about a single representative issue or example (10 on 1) than to make the same basic point about ten related issues or examples (1 on 10). A paper that has evolved from detailed analysis of what the writer takes to be his or her single most telling example is far more likely to arrive at a good idea than a paper that settles prematurely for one idea and applies it mechanically to each piece of evidence it encounters (i.e., the same general idea attached to 10 similar examples).

The shift from making one observation about ten examples to making ten possible observations about your single best example is the aim of the exercise. Ten, in this case, is an arbitrary number. The ten are the observations you make about your representative example along with any ideas these observations start to give you. If you can keep the number 10 in mind, it will prod you to keep asking yourself questions rather than stopping the observation process too soon. What do I notice? What else do I notice? What might this imply? What else might it imply?

For extended discussion of doing 10 on 1 as an organizational principle for papers, see Chapter 8 (Using Evidence to Build a Paper) in Unit II, Writing the Analytical
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 doodling, 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.
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.
Brooklyn Heights, 4:00 A.M.
Dana Ferrelli
sipping a warm forty oz.
Coors Light on a stoop in
Brooklyn Heights. I look
across the street, in the open window;
Blonde bobbing heads, the
smack of a jump rope, laughter
of my friends breaking
beer bottles. Putting out their
burning filters on the #5 of
a hopscotch court.
We reminisce of days when we were
Fat, pimple faced—
look how far we’ve come. But tomorrow
a little blonde girl will
pick up a Marlboro Light filter, just to play.
And I’ll buy another forty, because
that’s how I play now.

Reminiscing about how far I’ve come

1. **Words that repeat exactly:** forty × 2, blonde × 2, how far we’ve (I’ve) come × 2, light × 2, reminisce, reminiscing × 2, filter, filters × 2, Brooklyn Heights × 2

2. **Strands:** jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch (connecting logic: childhood games representing the carefree worldview of childhood); Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles (connecting logic: drugs, adult “games,” escapism?); smack, burning, breaking (violent actions and powerful emotion: burning)

3. **Binary oppositions:** how far we’ve come/how far I’ve come (a move from plural to singular, from a sense of group identity to isolation, from group values to a more individual consideration)
Blonde bobbing heads/little blonde girl
Burning/putting out
Coors Light, Marlboro Lights/jump rope, hopscotch
How far I’ve come (two meanings of far?, one positive, one not)
Heights/stoop
Present/past

4. Ranked repetitions, strands and binaries plus paragraph explaining the choice of one of these as central to understanding.

Most important repetitions: forty, how far we’ve/I’ve come

Most important strands: jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch; Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles

Most important binaries: jump rope, laughter, play, hopscotch versus Coors Light, Marlboro Light filters, beer bottles; burning/putting out

Paragraph(s):

This is a poem about growing up—or failing to grow up, both being subjects about which the poem expresses mixed emotions. The repetition of forty (forty-ounce beer) is interesting in this context. It signals a certain weariness—perhaps with a kind of pun on forty to suggest middle age and thus the speaker’s concern about moving toward being older in a way that seems stale and flat. The beer, after all, is warm—which is not the best state for a beer to be in, once opened, if it is to retain its taste and character. Forty ounces of beer—“supersizing”—suggest excess.

This reading of forty as excess along with the possible allusion to middle age takes us to what is, in our reading of the poem, the most important (or at least most interesting) binary opposition: burning versus putting out. We are attracted to this binary because it seems to be part of a more intense strand in the poem, one that runs counter to the weary prospect of moving on toward a perhaps lonely (“how far I’ve come”) middle-aged feeling. Burning goes with breaking and the smack of the jump rope, and even putting out, if we visualize putting out not just as fire extinguished but in terms of putting a cigarette out by pushing the burning end of it into something (the number 5 on the hopscotch court). The poem’s language has a violent and passionate edge to it, even though the violent words are not always in a violent context (for example, the smack of the jump rope).

This is a rather melancholy poem in which, perhaps, the poetic voice is mourning the passing, the “putting out” of the passion of youth (“burning”). In the poem’s more obvious binary—the opposition of childhood games to more “adult” ones—the same melancholy plays itself out, making the poem’s refrain-like repetition of “how far I’ve come” ring with unhappy irony. The little blonde girl is an image of the speaker’s own past self (because the poem talks about reminiscing), and the speaker mourns that little girl’s (her own) passing into a more uncertain and less carefree state. It is 4:00 a.m. in Brooklyn Heights—just about the end of night, the darkest point perhaps before the beginning of morning, and windows in the poem are open, so things are
The Method: Working with Patterns of Repetition and Contrast

not all bad. The friends make noise together, break bottles together, revisit hopscotch square 5 together, and contemplate moving on.

We couldn’t, by the way, find any significant anomalies (step 5) in the poem. That in itself suggests how highly patterned the poem is around its basic strands and binaries.

Try this 3.5: *Apply The Method to Something You Are Reading*

Try The Method on a piece of reading that you wish to understand better, perhaps a series of editorials on the same subject, an essay, one or more poems by the same author (because The Method is useful for reading across texts for common denominators), a collection of stories, a political speech, and so on. You can work with as little as a few paragraphs or as much as an entire article or chapter or book.

A Procedure for Finding and Querying Binaries

As should be evident, working with binaries is central to using The Method. But binaries are so pervasive a part of analysis that we’ve given them their own place in the Toolkit, and we take them up again in an upcoming chapter (Chapter 5, Analyzing Arguments).

In Chapter 5 we argue that writing and analyzing arguments is largely a matter of unearthing, rephrasing, and reevaluating the binary oppositions (this against that, on/off, dark/light, wild/domestic) that undergird them. Working with binaries is not the same thing as either/or thinking (right/wrong, good/bad, black/white, welfare state/free society). Either/or thinking is a problem because it reduces things to oversimplified extremes and reduces complex situations to only two choices. Working with binaries, however, is not about creating stark oppositions and weighing in heavily on one side or the other. It is about finding these oppositions and querying their accuracy.

In Chapter 5 there is a fuller discussion of a four-step procedure for working with binaries. This procedure should enhance your ability to understand and confront other people’s arguments and your own. Here, in brief, are the four steps:

1. Locate a Range of Opposing Categories (Binaries)
2. Analyze and Define the Opposing Terms
3. Question the Accuracy of the Binary and Rephrase the Terms
4. Substitute “To What Extent?” for “Either/Or”

Step four is the move that we are recommending now. It is a tool for rephrasing either/or choices—either free enterprise or government control—into qualified claims, making things a matter of degree. The operative phrase is “to what extent” or “the extent to which.” To what extent is the Supreme Court decision on allowing manufacturers to set minimum prices for retailers an evasion of government responsibility in favor of unregulated free enterprise?

Try this 3.6: *Working with Binaries*

Write a few paragraphs in which you work with the binaries suggested by the following familiar expression: “School gets in the way of one’s education.” Keep the focus on
Chapter 3  A Toolkit of Analytical Methods

working through the binaries implicit in the quotation. What other terms would you substitute for “school” and “education”? Coming up with a range of synonyms for each term will clarify what is at stake in the binary. Remember to consider the accuracy of the claim. To what extent, and in what ways, is the expression both true and false?

Try this 3.7:  Fieldwork in Either/Or Thinking

Locate some organizing contrasts in anything—something you are studying, something you’ve just written, something you saw on television last night, something on the front page of the newspaper, something going on at your campus or workplace, and so forth. Binaries pervade the way we think; therefore, you can expect to find them everywhere. Consider, for example, the binaries suggested by current trends in contemporary music or by the representation of women in birthday cards. Having selected the binaries you want to work with, pick one and transform the either/or thinking into more qualified thinking using the extent-to-which formula.

FREEWRITING

We have placed freewriting last in the Toolkit because it draws on the other writing strategies discussed in this chapter, notably paraphrasing and 10 on 1. Freewriting is a method of arriving at ideas by writing continuously about a subject for a limited period of time without pausing to edit, correct, bite your pen, or stare into space. The rationale behind this activity can be understood through a well-known remark by the novelist E.M. Forster (in regard to the “tyranny” of prearranging everything): “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” Freewriting gives you the chance to see what you’ll say.

The writer Anne Lamott writes eloquently (in Bird by Bird) about the censor we all hear as a nasty voice—actually a collection of nasty voices—in our heads that keep us from writing. These are the internalized voices of past critics whose comments have become magnified to suggest that we will never get it right. Freewriting allows us to tune out these voices long enough to discover what we might think.

This activity is sometimes known by the term prewriting. We prefer the terms freewriting or exploratory writing because prewriting implies something that happens before writing and that has no place in the final form. Good analytical writing, at whatever stage, has an exploratory feel. It shares its discovery process with the reader. And to a significant extent, the final draft re-creates for the reader the writer’s experience of arriving at his or her key ideas.

This is not to say that writers should care only about the process of discovery and not about the final product, nor are we suggesting that writers should substitute freewriting and inconclusive thinking for carefully organized finished drafts. We are claiming, however, that writers have a much easier and more productive experience revising the final or penultimate draft if they spend more time doing various kinds of exploratory writing before moving to the final draft stage.
In freewriting, you write *without stopping* for a predetermined period of time, usually ten to twenty minutes. There aren’t many rules to freewriting, just that it is important to keep your pen (or fingers on the keyboard) moving. Don’t reread as you go. Don’t pause to correct things. Don’t cross things out. Just keep writing. To get to good writing, you first have to tolerate some chaos. In freewriting, especially if you engage in it frequently, you often surprise yourself with the quality of your own thinking, with the ideas you didn’t really know you had and the many details you hadn’t really noticed until you started writing.

**Try this 3.8: Descriptions from Everyday Life**

Spend a week describing things that you can observe in your everyday environment—whatever interests you on a particular day, or the same kind of thing over a period of days. Get the details of what you are describing on the page. If judgments and generalizations emerge, let them come, but don’t stay on them long. Get back to the narration of detail as quickly as you can. At the end of the week, write a piece called either “What I learned in a week of looking at . . . ” or come up with your own shaping title.

**Passage-Based Focused Freewriting**

Passage-based focused freewriting is a version of freewriting particularly suited for increasing your ability to learn from what you read. It prompts in-depth analysis of a representative example, on the assumption that you’ll attain a better appreciation of the whole after you’ve explored how a piece of it works.

Passage-based focused freewriting resembles freewriting in encouraging you to leap associatively from idea to idea as they arise, and it differs from a finished essay, in which the sentences follow logically as you unfold your central idea. The passage-based version differs from regular freewriting, however, in adding the limitation of focus on a piece of text within which this associative thinking may occur.

Narrow the scope to a single passage, a brief piece of the reading (at least a sentence, at most a paragraph) to anchor your analysis. You might choose the passage in answer to one of the following questions:

- What one passage in the reading most needs to be discussed—is most useful for understanding the material—and why?
- What one passage seems puzzling, difficult to pin down, anomalous, or even just unclear—and how might this be explained?

One advantage of focused freewriting is that its impromptu nature encourages you to take chances, to think out loud on the page. It invites you to notice what you notice in the moment and take some stabs at what it might mean without having to worry about formulating a weighty thesis statement or maintaining consistency. It allows you to worry less about what you don’t understand and instead start to work things out as you write.

There is no set procedure for such writing, but here are some guidelines:
1. Seek to understand before you judge. Focus on what the text is saying and doing and what it is inviting readers to think, not on your own agreement/disagreement or like/dislike. Attend to the point of view it advances on the subject at hand, not to your point of view on that subject. Eventually you should arrive at your point of view about its point of view, but that generally comes later.

2. Choose a limited piece of concrete evidence to focus on. Select a passage that you find interesting, that you have questions about, perhaps one that you don’t quite understand. That way your writing will have some work to do.

3. Contextualize the evidence. Where does the passage come from in the text? Of what larger discussion is it a part? Briefly answering these questions prevents you from taking things out of context.

4. Make observations about the evidence. Stay close to the data you’ve quoted. Paraphrase key phrases in the passage, teasing out the possible meanings of these words. Then reflect on what you’ve come to better understand through paraphrasing. Note: to encourage attention to the words and discourage overly general leaps, it is useful to write out the passage before you begin your freewriting (especially if you are being asked to do the freewriting in class, as is often the case in college writing). The act of copying often induces you to notice more about the particular features of your chosen passage.

5. Share your reasoning about what the evidence means. As you move from observation to implication, remember that you need to explain how you know the data mean what you claim they mean.

6. Address how the passage is representative. Consider how the passage you’ve selected connects to broader issues in the reading. At various points in your freewriting feel free to move from your analysis of local details to address what, given what you now understand, the work as a whole may plausibly be “saying” about this or that issue or question. It’s okay to work with the details for almost the entire time and then press yourself to an interpretive leap with the formula, “I’m almost out of time but my big point is . . . ”

Try this 3.9: Doing a Passage-Based Focused Freewrite

Select a passage from any of the material that you are reading and copy it at the top of the page. Then do a twenty-minute focused freewrite on it, using the guidelines already stated. It is often productive to take the focused freewrite and type it, revising and further freewriting until you have filled the inevitable gaps in your thinking that the time limit has created. (One colleague of ours has students do this in a different font, so both can see how the thinking is evolving.) Eventually, you can build up, through a process of accretion, the thinking for an entire paper in this way.

Writers’ Notebooks

Writers’ notebooks (journals) are unlike a personal diary, in which you keep track of your days’ activities and recount the feelings these occasioned; journals are for generating and collecting ideas and for keeping track of your ongoing interactions with...
course materials. A journal can be, in effect, a collection of focused freewrites that you
develop in response to the reading and lectures in a course.

The best way to get a journal to work for you is to experiment. You might try, for
example, copying and commenting on statements from your reading or class meetings
that you found potentially illuminating. Use the journal to write down the ideas, reac-
tions, and germs of ideas you had during a class discussion or that you found running
around in your head after a late night’s reading. Use the journal to retain your first
impressions of books or films or music or performances or whatever so that you can
then look back at them and trace the development of your thinking.

If possible, write in your journal every day. As with freewriting, the best way to get
started is just to start, see what happens, and take it from there. Also as with freewrit-
ing, the more you write, the more you’ll find yourself noticing, and, thus, the more
you’ll have to say.

Passage-Based Focused Freewriting: An Example

Following is an example of a student’s exploratory writing on an essay by the
twentieth-century, African-American writer Langston Hughes. The piece is a twenty-
minute reflection on two excerpts. Most notable about this piece, perhaps, is the sheer
number of interesting ideas. That may be because the writer continually returns to
the language of the original quotes for inspiration. She is not restricted by main-
taining a single and consistent thread. It is interesting, though, that as the freewrite
progresses, a primary focus (on the second of her two quotes) seems to emerge.

Passages from “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” by Langston Hughes

“But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom
beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of
subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a
smile. Yet the Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not
like me to write about it. The old subconscious ‘white is best’ runs through her mind. . . . And now
she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations—likewise almost everything else distinctly
racial.”

“We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the
mountain, free within ourselves.”

Langston Hughes’s 1926 essay on the situation of the Negro artist in America sets up some
interesting issues that are as relevant today as they were in Hughes’s time. Interestingly, the final
sentence of the essay (“We build our temples . . .”) will be echoed some four decades later by the
Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, but with a different spin on the idea of freedom. Hughes
writes “we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.” King says, “Free at last, free at
last, my God almighty, we’re free at last.” King asserts an opening out into the world—a freeing
of black people, finally, from slavery and then another century of oppression.

Hughes speaks of blacks in a more isolated position— “on top of the mountain” and
“within ourselves.” Although the mountain may stand for a height from which the artist
can speak, it is hard to be heard from the top of mountains. It is one thing to be free. It is
another to be free within oneself. What does this phrase mean? If I am free within myself
I am at least less vulnerable to those who would restrict me from without. I can live with
their restrictions. Mine is an inner freedom. Does inner freedom empower artists? Perhaps it does. It may allow them to say what they want and not worry about what others say or think. This is one thing that Hughes seems to be calling for. But he is also worried about lack of recognition of Negro artists, not only by whites but by blacks. His use of the repeated phrase, tom-tom, is interesting in this respect. It, like the word “mountain,” becomes a kind of refrain in the essay—announcing both a desire to rise above the world and its difficulties (mountain) and a desire to be heard (tom-tom and mountain as pulpit).

The idea of revolt, outright rebellion, is present but subdued in the essay. The tom-tom is a “revolt against weariness” and also an instrument for expressing “joy and laughter.” The tom-tom also suggests a link with a past African and probably Native American culture—communicating by drum and music and dance. White culture in the essay stands for a joyless world of “work, work, work.” This is something I would like to think about more, as the essay seems to link the loss of soul with the middle and upper classes, both black and white.

And so the essay seeks to claim another space among those he calls “the low down folks, the so-called common element.” Of these he says “. . . they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let’s dance!” In these lines Hughes the poet clearly appears. Does he say then that the Negro artist needs to draw from those of his own people who are the most removed from middle class American life? If I had more time, I would start thinking here about Hughes’s use of the words “race” and “racial.” . . .

ASSIGNMENTS: Using the Toolkit

1. Pick a single scene from a film, a single photograph from a collection of a photographer’s photographs, or some other single example that is interestingly representative of a larger subject. Do 10 on 1 with your scene or other representative example. Notice as much as you can about it. Then organize your observations using The Method: What details repeat? What is opposed to what? Use the results to generate a piece of writing.

2. Work with binaries to develop a short essay. You might consider, for example, some of the either/or categories that students tend to put each other in, or their teachers. Or look to current events in the world or in some more local arena, and find the binaries that seem to divide people or groups.

3. Find a subject to analyze using Notice and Focus and then The Method. Your aim here initially is not to write a formal paper but to do data-gathering on the page. After you have written the paragraph that is the final part of The Method, revise and expand your work into a short essay. Don’t worry too much at this point about form (introductory paragraph, for example) or thesis. Just write at greater length about what you noticed and what you selected as most revealing or interesting or strange or significant, and why.

You might use a story, essay, or poem by a writer you like, perhaps a painting or an artistic photograph. The Method could yield interesting results applied to the architecture on your campus, the student newspaper, campus clothing styles, or the latest news about the economy.