

Counterproductive Habits of Mind

Generalizing

- “What it boils down to . . .”
- “What this adds up to . . .”

Generalizations = Vagueness

- “Generalizing deflects attention – usually much too swiftly from the data that produced the generalization in the first place.”
- “They allow you to dismiss virtually everything you’ve read and heard except the general idea you’ve arrived at.”

Examples of Generalizing / Vagueness

- “The poem is about love.”
- “The poem is about death.”
- “The poem is about rebirth.”
- “The economy of a particular emerging nation is inefficient.”
- These statements say very little – they could fit many poems or nations: you stopped thinking prematurely

How to Avoid Generalizing

#1: Trace your impressions that gave you the generalization back to their concrete cause:

Choose to notice more.

Be concrete explaining in detail – don't write a thesis that is high up on the abstract ladder.

Avoid the Judgment Reflex

- Judgment Reflex:
 - Right / Wrong
 - Good / Bad
 - Loved it / Hated it
 - Couldn't relate to it / boring / wonderful
 - fair / unfair / crazy / ugly / unrealistic / pretty
 - These judgments give a lack of information.
 - With data we tend to leap to evaluative claims (judgment)

Judging

- “A writer needs to take into account how the judgment has been affected by the particular situation (context) and to acknowledge how thinking about these details has led to restricting (qualifying) the range of the judgment.”
- “X is sometimes true in these particular circumstances; z is probably the right thing to do but only when A and B occur. - a form of judgment is arrived at – but not phrased in judgment terms:

Recasting Judgment: An Analytical Mind: Seeing the Whole Picture

- **“X is sometimes true in these particular circumstances; z is probably the right thing to do but only when A and B occur. - a form of judgment is arrived at – but not phrased in judgment terms: like / dislike, good / bad**
- **An analytical writer’s conclusion discloses what he/she has come to understand about X rather than how he/she imperiously rules on the worth of X.”**

Debate-Style Argument

- “Debate style argument produces a frame of mind where defending positions matters more than taking the necessary time to develop ideas worth defending.”
- “It may nourish the mud-slinging and opinionated mind-set – attack first – that proliferates in editorials and television talk shows, not to mention the conversations you hear in going about your life.”

Debate Style Arguments

- Debates are necessary for making value and policy decisions, however “too many of the arguments we all read, hear, and participate in every day are based on insufficient analysis.”

Remedy for Debate Arguments

- “The temporary suspension of the pro / con debate style habit of mind
- “Argument and analysis are profoundly connected, but their stances toward subject matter and audience differ so much that most people need to learn them separately before being able to put them back together.”

Argumentative / Analytical Mindsets

- **Argumentative mindset is very visible in society so much that few of us focus on “Analysis – the more reflective and less combative approach that analysis embraces”**

Argument / Analysis Questions

- “What can be said with truth about X and Y?”
- “Which is better, X or Y?”
- “How can we best achieve X or Y?”
- “Why should we stop X or Y?”
- “What does X or Y mean?”

Analysis

- “In analysis the evidence (your data) is something you wish to understand, and the claims are the assertions about what the evidence means.”

Argument / Analysis

- “The claim that an argument makes – for ex. Readers should or shouldn’t vote for _____ or believe _____ is often an answer to a “should” question. **The writer of an analysis is more concerned with discovering how each of these complex subjects might be defined and explained than with convincing readers to approve or disapprove them.”**

Avoid Overpersonalizing (Naturalizing Our Assumptions)

- **DON'T assume everyone thinks, lives, believes as you do**
- **DON'T assume something is “common sense”**: Common sense – “my point of view doesn't need defending or even explaining because any sensible person would think this way.”

The Personal

Does not have to be the personal half of one of these binaries:

Personal / Impersonal

Subjective vs. Objective

(biased / unbiased)

personal expression vs. impersonal analysis

passionately engaged vs. detached

genuinely felt vs. heartless

Understanding the Personal

- As a writer your personal input to your writing is expressing “what your stake is in the subject matter”.
- Note that your personal response is shaped by forces outside of you: social, cultural, educational, historical, etc.
- “The extreme version of this position allots little space for what we like to think of as individuality at all: the self is a site through which dominant cultural ways of understanding the world (ideologies) circulate.”

Some personal impact is GOOD

- “Most effective analytical writing has a strong personal element – the writer’s stake in the subject matter. As readers, we want to the reader is engaged in the subject matter, cares what he says about it, and is sharing what he finds interesting.

BUT . . .

How to Properly Use Personal Narrative

- Do not allow personal narratives to substitute for careful consideration of a subject. This allows our own experiences and prejudice to become an unquestioned standard or value.
- i.e.: Your negative experience “with an HMO may predispose you to dismiss a plan for nationalized health care.”
- Storytelling can offer concrete experience and it can take you back to the source of your convictions.