Online Chapter 2

Writing Essays

Essays come in different sizes and serve different purposes. One way to break them down is by components: openers that announce the subject and introduce writer to reader; middle paragraphs, where facts are presented and persuasion takes place; and conclusions meant to leave a final impression. These are the parts that make up paragraph clusters, groups of paragraphs dedicated to a common end. A short essay may contain only one paragraph cluster. Longer pieces may have several that work toward a larger purpose. You'll find more on how paragraphs themselves are put together in Online Chapter 3.

Openers

Most writers have a fair idea of what they want to say before they begin to say it. Your basic plan will likely reshape itself somewhat during the writing process, but a common first step is to get things off the ground with an opening paragraph. You can always rework it later if you need to. Consider this workmanlike opener from an Internet article:

> If the term "thigh gap" hasn't made it into your daily vernacular yet, consider yourself lucky. The concept isn't new. In fact, it's biology for some. A "thigh gap" is essentially the space between two skinny upper legs that don't touch, a mainstay of fashion models and teenaged girls who haven't reached full maturity yet. What is new, however, is the proclivity among teen girls (and some boys) to acquire this "gap" by whatever means, including starvation and other unhealthy practices.
>
> Jordana Divon, "'Thigh Gap' Fixation Results in Teen Girls Starving Themselves"

Most of us would see this as a good beginning paragraph[1] for an essay on a bizarre phenomenon. It says a lot about the coming essay, which will use stories, testimony, and possibly pictures to show that teenagers do indeed notice "thigh gap" and go to unwholesome lengths to achieve it. That's the contract the writer is offering—read this and you'll know more about this strange fixation, including some of the dangers it gives rise to.

The essay will likely have two parts: one on the gap itself and one on the dangers it represents. The gap-itself section will come first and may offer a brief history of the issue going back to the "heroin chic" fad of the 1990's, possibly featuring Mick Jagger or Kate Moss. Be that as it may, it will certainly have some more up-to-date examples to show that the issue has made a comeback. Quotations from actual teenagers and concerned authorities will be helpful here.

Then the writer will turn from description to commentary. Having a thigh gap may or may not be ok, but starving yourself or excessive purging is not. She will use case histories—personal or researched—to show that these dangers are real and worrisome. She may offer a solution to the problem but doesn't have to. That isn't part of the contract.

Just as important, the opening paragraph sets the tone for everything to follow. Divon is clearly an engaging writer, comfortable with word choices ranging in formality from *skinny* to *proclivity* and open to a notable amount of rhythmic variety—a wide range of sentence and breath unit lengths. Like the readers she has in mind, she's socially engaged and alert to trends.

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[1] The original online article split the quoted sentences into three paragraphs, in keeping with the journalistic practice of starting a new paragraph at almost every period. At the risk of offending some readers, I don't see much harm in short paragraphs even when—as here—the ideas might make better sense grouped together. Unintimidating shorter paragraphs are probably the wave of the future, particularly online. For now, though, academic and other formal sorts of writing still favor longer units, even in introductions.

By the end of the paragraph you know what the piece will be about, roughly how it will unfold, and who you are dealing with—whether Divon is the sort of person you'd like to listen to for a while.

This is a key point. Your opening paragraph introduces your subject, but it also introduces *you*, at least as you will appear in this piece of writing. You want to show the topic in an interesting light, but you also want to project a voice that will capture the readers you are writing for.

Those are all qualities to keep in mind when starting a paper of your own. Variations are possible, but most pieces begin like Divon's, saying what the writing will be about, indicating how it will be treated, and offering a sample of the writer's voice. If readers are intrigued, they may read on. If not, they won't unless they have to.

Notice I said "what the writing will be about," not "what the writing will prove." Aside from technical and business writing, where it is often required, it has become less and less common for writers to lead off with a "thesis statement" anticipating the point they want to make. More often they float an interesting topic and appealing voice in hopes you'll read on to discover what they have to say about it. That approach has a practical value as well. You may not know yourself what you will wind up saying, and even if you think you do, you could well adjust your plans as you grapple with the ideas that come up later in the paper. It's good to leave yourself some leeway starting out.

Exercise 1

1) Put yourself in this writer's place. What issue or problem is O'Conner writing about? What sort of reader does she hope to appeal to? How do you know? Where do you think her article will go from here?

Picture this: you're scrolling through your Twitter timeline. Your eyes pan across a Promoted Tweet from a well-known apparel retailer. Let's call it Dap Inc. A week later, you're browsing at your local mall, where you happen upon a sale at the Dap. You emerge with a new swimsuit in hand. Both Twitter and the Dap know you saw that Promoted Tweet, even if you don't recall it. And now both companies know you followed through on a purchase. As you swipe your loyalty card at the Dap, the store sends data back to Twitter, allowing both the retailer and the social media giant to see that their targeted advertising worked.[2]

> Clare O'Conner, **"**Twitter Goes To The Mall: Social Giant Will Use Big Data To See Where You Shop"

2) Now consider this opening paragraph. Again, what issue or problem is Stack writing about? What sort of reader does she hope to appeal to? How do you know? Where do you think her article will go from here?

> In this era of tight budgets and a stagnant job market, the conventional wisdom is that team players must always show willingness to take on new tasks — even if the tasks lie outside their area of expertise or why they were hired in the first place ("other duties as assigned"). But let's be real here. In some instances, "It's not my job" reflects the right attitude, especially when you take Personal Return on Investment (PROI) into account.
>
> Laura Stack, "It's Not My Job!: The Words a Leader Should WANT To Hear"

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[2] As before, this example condenses four bite-size journalistic paragraphs into one. But the four really add up to one introduction to O'Connor's essay.

3) Suppose you were asked to write a piece on payday lending. (Google it to find out more.) Write two opening paragraphs, one for an article in a school newspaper and one for a letter to the editor in a general circulation paper. Be for it, against it, or objective. Take your pick. Make sure to suit your voice to your probable audience.

Generating Middle Paragraphs

The middle paragraphs of your paper are where you do the heavy lifting. Unfortunately, that's also where it's easiest to lose your way. How you keep your focus throughout and present your ideas in their most convincing and digestible form? The best system I've found for making this happen is to construct what Linda Flower has called an issue tree,[3] an upside-down sort of outline that draws new ideas out of old instead of forcing you to plan out a whole yet-to-be-written essay at the outset.

Here's how it works. You have your opener. What comes next is a piece of your argument that adds to what you want to say. Which piece? Adds how? Those can be frightening unknowns, but there's an easy way to fill them in. Go back to your introduction and write down the essence of what you want your piece to say, whether it appears there in so many words or not. Recall your imaginary reader from Chapter 2 and have him or her ask, "What are you trying to prove?" "Obsessing about your thigh gap is silly and may be dangerous," you might answer, or "Most of

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[3] *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*. The concept of issue trees was introduced by the logician David Wojick, who explains more about them at http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2013/07/10/the-issue-tree-structure-of-expressed-thought/ The important point is that they move forward, from what you want to prove to the likely readers' questions you'll have to address. The benefits are many: you get a leg up when it comes to what you need to say and how it can be divided into paragraphs, and the process more or less forces you to consider your readers at each step and write coherently.

us have no idea how sophisticated merchandizing has grown through the feedback loops between electronic ads and store loyalty cards," or "Taking on added jobs they may not be qualified for can make employees *less* productive ." Write your answer down: "I mean to show that. . . ."

Don't let those imaginary readers get away. Sift through your main idea looking for ideas they might not understand. "*What's that*?" is the key question at this point. If the readers you have in mind wouldn't easily understand *Promoted Tweet* or *PROI*, for instance, those terms will need explaining. Write them down beneath your main idea statement under the heading "Terms To Be Explained." Leave some room. You might be adding to this list when unfamiliar terms pop up in later paragraphs.

On another paper or in another computer window write out six basic questions:

"What's that?"

"How so?"

"For instance?"

"How do you know?"

"Why?"

"So what?"

Keep these questions handy; you're going to need them again. Now let that reader in your head tell you where to go from here.

Once your basic terms are defined if necessary, what would your readers want to know next? Draw on your six questions for this step. "*Why* is worrying about your thigh gap silly?" "*How* do additional jobs harm workers' productivity in their real areas of expertise?" "*What are some examples* of advertiser-merchandiser data pooling?" "*Why should anyone care* if advertisers and retailers share data?" "*How do you know* the thigh gap obsession is dangerous?" Your answers

(and you will probably have to research some of them) will make up the framework of your essay. Each paragraph will address one or more of these imagined queries. Write down the questions and your answers as well. Viola! You have the pieces of an outline.

For instance, let's focus on the introduction about assignments outside an employee's chief area. Notice that Stack slips a definition of *PROI* into the introduction itself. Writing for an online business journal, she assumes many of her readers already recognize the term, but she adds a quick reminder just in case. In her next paragraph Stack gives two examples—answers to the question "*For instance*?"—citing a software engineer doing photocopying and a CEO scheduling meetings. Then comes a paragraph on "*So what*?" Stack takes the employer's point of view: you're paying those people way too much for those kinds of work and wasting money.

How should you avoid this situation? Stack comes up with two suggestions, each of which leads to a "*What*?" question requiring a brief explanation of its own. 1) You should think of "buckets," two or three key responsibilities to be each employee's exclusive concern, and 2) you and the employees themselves should give full weight to PROI, Personal Return on Investment. People put time and money into learning how to do a certain job. They and their bosses should make sure that job is the center of their duties, their PROI. These ideas are a bit complicated, so Stack gives each of them a paragraph of its own.

Then comes another "*So what*?" question. Well, if your employees are diverted from the work you're paying them for, you need to change things. "*How*?" You can assign the extra duties to someone else or eliminate or outsource them, so your people can get back to their proper work. These interrelated ideas get a separate paragraph as well.

Stack's piece is short and she breaks it off near this point, but it's easy to think of plenty of other things she might have said. Reallocating, eliminating and outsourcing jobs might each get a

paragraph or two of its own. *How* do you go about reassigning duties? *What* problems may arise when you do? *How* best to handle them? Eliminating and outsourcing duties are wide open to the same sort of development.

Notice how this process works. As far as I know, Stack didn't flog her brain to come up with a finished outline before she began to write. Instead, she let the process itself guide her to each new idea. As anyone knows who's ever been in a conversation that started with bean soup and wound up on NCAA brackets or window treatments, that can be risky. But here the proceedings are reined in by those six questions: *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* and *"So what?"* They simply won't allow you to wander too far from the point.

Here's the way I imagine the essay developed in Stack's mind—whether it did or not, *your* essays could develop this way. Something got her started, perhaps an assignment from her editor or an experience of her own, and she decided to write about how workers' willingness to take on any job that comes along may not be a good thing. Her internal interlocutor asked "Why?" "Because it wastes their real expertise," she answered herself. "Give me an *For instance* or two," she imagined her reader asking, and so she did. "Ok, but *how* can I avoid these misdirected efforts?" That question led to the "buckets" idea, the point about PROI, and the practical solutions: delegate, eliminate, or outsource.

In the full article the imaginary inquisitor still was unsatisfied. "But tell me," she might have asked, "*how* can I be sure employees concentrate on what they do best?" This leads to a last suggestion: have all the workers in the organization list what they think are their three buckets of essential responsibility and then compare notes. That might prove a very fruitful exercise.

Once again, here are the chief questions your reader can ask to guide you to the next step in your presentations: *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* and *"So what?"*

And here is a possible schematic of Stark's article as I've described it:

Main idea: taking on added jobs they may not be qualified for can make employees *less* productive .

Terms To Be Explained: *PROI*

Imaginary reader's question: "For instance?"

         A software engineer Xeroxing   A CEO scheduling meetings

"So what?"

         It wastes money

"How can I avoid this?"

         Buckets   PROI

"What are those?"

         Limited areas of essential expertise   Return on hard-won expertise

"But so what?

         Things have to change

"Change how?"

    Delegate duties   Eliminate duties   Outsource duties

"How do I bring this about?"

         Run the "Name your buckets" exercise

We've been talking about idea trees as a way of going forward, drawing new topics from those that went before. But the six-question approach is just as useful for reviewing "finished" writing. Don't overlook this step. In addition to helping you see where you may have more work

to do, it is almost sure to spring new ideas. For instance, Stark might have noticed under that "*Change how*?" question that if there's no one but a software engineer to see to the duplicating, the office probably needs more staff. On the other hand, if people are wandering around doing this and that because there's nothing better to do, some of *them* might need eliminating.

As you can see, developing a paper this way is open-ended. Stark could have taken the same main idea in other directions. For instance, she might have imagined her first questioner asking "So what?" about her main idea. Answering that might have led her off into the costs of lowered productivity and its effect on distracted employees, with all the questions those subjects would entail. Once again, her ideas would flow from the readers' questions she imagined and answered as she wrote, and the article would stay coherent and focused because of the nature of the questions themselves.

Exercise 2

1) You have to write about those Payday Lenders! You've Googled the topic; so, what do you think of them? Conjure up your imaginary reader to ask an immediate *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* and *"So what?"* question about your first response. Go on for at least three more steps, answering each question as it comes up and then imagining what a reader would ask next. Don't be alarmed if these questions lead you to rethink your ideas. Rethinking is likely to make your essay stronger. Write down your (perhaps now changed) reaction to payday lending along with your inventory of questions about it. Label each question as a *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* or *"So what?"*

2) Recast your answers into a statement-question-answer outline like the one above. Think about how the ideas in this outline might be bundled into middle paragraphs.

3) Write the essay.

Arranging Middle Paragraphs

What bit of your argument goes where? Sometimes the answer is almost automatic. Describing a process—how to bake bread or hook up a DVR, for example—you think the steps through and set them out in order (and then go back to make sure you haven't missed any). Narrated events usually call for organization in time—"*After* Mark Zuckerman enrolled at Harvard to study classics, he grew more involved with social software, *first* developing CourseMatch, a program for selecting classes, and *then* Facemash, which allowed users to rank photographs of classmates for "hotness." Descriptive writing generally moves through space—panning top to bottom or from one side to another, zooming in or out. Here's a wide perspective that narrows in on a beaded curtain and some meddlesome flies:

> The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies.
>
> Ernest Hemingway, "Hills like White Elephants"

Writing a comparison essay, you need to carefully balance what you say about A with what you say about B. If A is big, for example, what size is B? Is A intelligent? Then how smart is B? Once you've settled on your points of comparison, you can opt for a block organization, where you say all you have to say about A in one place and then set down all you have to say about B in another block, usually covering the details about each in the same order. Or you can decide to develop the comparison point by point—A has been around for years; B is new. A promotes inequality; B tries to level the playing field. And so on.

Cause and effect writing presents similar choices. You can start with the effect, especially if it's widely recognized, and then explore its causes, concentrating on the most interesting or least obvious ones. Or you can work from cause to effect, particularly if the effect or effects are unintended or little known. In either case the bulk of your essay goes to the part you're most interested in presenting or think your readers will find most enlightening.

Although we've been talking here about groups of paragraphs, as Online Chapter 3 points out, these standard kinds of organization can apply *within* a single paragraph as well.

Exercise 3

1) Choose a process you're interested in and list at least five steps to completing it. Write them down in the proper order. If step one is gathering necessary materials, be sure to say what these are. Circle any terms you might have to define for an audience of general readers.

2) Google and draw up a list of five characteristics like size or habitat that might be used to compare giant and red pandas. Write these down in two forms: first as an a/b list and then as separate blocks, one for the giant panda and one for the red.

3) In 2007 Texas and Illinois, the last two states where horses were killed for meat, banned the practice as inhumane. As a result, the same unwanted horses are now likely to be shipped to Canadian or Mexican slaughterhouses, where they may be *less* humanely treated. What are the causes and effects involved here? How would you organize them in an essay for general readers?

Although it's certainly useful to know how to organize process descriptions, narratives, and so on, most writing you'll be called on to do won't fit into those narrow categories. How do you develop an organization to deal with such open-ended topics? Here again, your issue tree

questions and imaginary reader can come to the rescue. Suppose you've defined your terms as needed and stated your main idea. Which of those six questions would your reader ask next?

Here's an extended example. The art historian Nicholas Jeeves recently noted a curious fact: people today generally smile whenever they're in front of a camera, but almost no one in older portraits is caught smiling.[4] He opens his discussion this way:

> Today when someone points a camera at us, we smile. This is the cultural and social reflex of our time, and such are our expectations of a picture portrait. But in the long history of portraiture the open smile has been largely, as it were, frowned upon.

Jeeves knew his reader—whoever he imagined that to be—would probably grant that people today generally smile for the camera, but that last sentence sounds less obvious. In fact, it sounds like a thesis statement, though as it happens there's quite a bit more Jeeves wanted his essay to prove. At any event, that point about missing smiles is what most readers would seize upon. Which of the six questions would they ask next?

"What's that?"

"How so?"

"For instance?"

"How do you know?"

"Why?"

"So what?"

Think about it. Everyone knows what a smile is and how one is formed, so *"What's that?"* and *"How so?"* are non-starters. *"For instance?"* and *"How do you know?"* look more

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[4] "The Serious and the Smirk: The Smile in Portraiture," http://publicdomainreview.org/2013/09/18/the-serious-and-the-smirk-the-smile-in-portraiture/#sthash.7ZbpzECz.dpuf

promising, especially here, where they overlap. Jeeves' proposition concerns what happened in the past, and examples are the most common way to deal with that sort of question. His next few paragraphs offer us a *"How do you know?"* quotation from Charles Dickens about how people dislike being pictured smiling and the negative *"For instance?"* of the Mona Lisa, whose portrait stands out in large part because Leonardo showed her with a smile on her lips.

"Ok, smiles are rare in pictures from the past," the reader might grant, "*but why*?" Answering this *"why?"* question neatly shapes the rest of the essay. Jeeves provides three "*Why*?" answers, one negative, one technical, and one intriguing enough to explore in detail. Which goes where? He puts them in climactic order, sweeping the false explanation aside first, illustrating the technical question second, and settling down to discuss the intriguing possibility third.

First, he says, despite all you may have heard, people didn't avoid smiling because their teeth were bad. *How does he know*? Not long ago by midlife everyone's teeth were bad, so bad teeth were no disgrace. Jeeves offers a striking *"for instance"*: the Victorian prime minister Lord Palmerston, widely considered the most handsome man in England. Palmerston's teeth were notoriously unsightly, but no one made fun of them until he had them replaced with a false set that flapped when he spoke.

It's true, though, that smiles are so fleeting and hard to catch they might have frightened some artists off. This is the technical answer. Jeeves supplies two *"for instances"*: the sickly effect of photographs taken a moment before or after the subject breaks into a real smile and a ghastly Antonello da Messina portrait of a man whose smile doesn't quite come off. The fellow looks like an alien behind a rubber mask. (The picture is reproduced in the article and well worth looking up.)

Finally, there's the matter of what smiles were taken to mean in the art of the past, and here Jeeves hits full stride with a paragraph cluster showing that "[b]y the 17th century in Europe it was a well-established fact that the only people who smiled broadly, in life and in art, were the poor, the lewd, the drunk, the innocent, and the entertainment."

How does he know? Once again, *"For instance?"* comes to the fore. Jeeves illustrates and analyzes the smile of a naked, smirking Cupid in Caravaggio; the licentious grins of Dutch 17th Century peasants, drunkards, and musicians; and the gaping mouths of Hogarth's London slum dwellers. He sets these examples in chronological order from Caravaggio (late Renaissance) to Hogarth (18th Century).

Here is a quick sketch of Jeeves' organization:

Main idea: People are rarely shown smiling in early portraits largely because smiling in pictures was associated with vice and foolishness.

Terms To Be Explained: *none*

Imaginary reader's question: "How do you know smiling portraits were rare?"

    Dickens quotation   Negative example (*Mona Lisa*)

"Why would they be rare?

    Not because of bad teeth

        "How do you know?" Lord Palmerston

    But because smiles are hard to capture

        "How do you know?" Common experience, the Antonello portrait

    And because smiling meant foolishness or vice

        "How do you know?" Caravaggio, Dutch painters, Hogarth

Exercise 4

1) You're writing about the supposed link between childhood vaccinations and autism. (Better Google it.) Choose one of several approaches, like "How did this fear of vaccinations start?" "What is the evidence for such a link?" "Who believes in it?" or "What do the experts say?" and write an introduction that explains the issue and establishes your voice. Write down your main idea, whether or not it appears in the introduction and construct an issue tree, imagining readers' *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* or *"So what?"* questions about each answer you make. Don't hesitate to go back and change anything you need to.

2) Recast your material in an outline like the ones above. Feel free to give multiple answers to a question as Jeeves did when he gave three reasons that smiles are rare in early portraiture.

3) Write the essay.

Creating Signposts

It's as dangerous to assume that readers will be able to follow your thinking without help as it is to belabor each minor transition from one idea to the next. You want to strike a happy balance, and here again your imaginary reader can show you how. Would Emma Watson or Michelle Obama see at a glance where you were going? If so, just go there. If not, highlight the links between your ideas. Online Chapter 3 discusses transitions between paragraphs, but longer pieces, especially those made up of more than one paragraph cluster may require mega-connectors—things like extra spaces between sections, transitional sentences or paragraphs, or headings.

This chapter, for instance, starts with a major heading—"Online Chapter 2: Writing Essays"—and then moves through a series of minor ones: "Openers," "Generating Middle Paragraphs," "Arranging Middle Paragraphs," and "Creating Signposts," each one showing

where a new paragraph cluster begins. But connections between the parts of a sentence cluster may need reinforcing as well. "Openers," the first section in this chapter, begins by quoting the "thigh gap" introduction and moving to a series of closely related paragraphs showing what that introduction implies about the essay to follow. Then the direction changes. Suddenly we're talking about the writer instead of the essay. "Just as important," the transition that begins this new train of thought says in effect, "Ok. Now we're moving on to another idea of equal significance." The discussion takes another zig in the last paragraph before Exercise 1. "Notice I said," the transition that begins this paragraph, tells readers, "Here's yet another important point to consider."

Sharper breaks in your line of thought may call for stronger measures, like transitional sentences—"But fast as it was, Amazon's Fire TV attracted its full share of criticism." Or even short transitional paragraphs. For instance, after explaining a conventional economic belief that putting more money in circulation creates new jobs, Zachery Karabell pivots to the meat of his argument:

> Yet the past five years have not played out that way, and there are two ways to view why they haven't. One view is that major financial crises lead to longer cycles, so returning to acceptable employment levels takes a lot of time. The other view is that this isn't a cyclical problem but a structural one.[5]

There are two good ways to see where your writing might need especially clear signposts like these. It never hurts to use both of them. One is to scan your idea tree outline for ideas that seem to make sudden shifts, like the change I made a moment ago from talking about the content of introductions to talking about the writer of introductions. The other is to ask your imaginary

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[5] "Reality Has No Partisan Bias."

reader at the beginning of each new paragraph, "Are you still with me? Can you see where I'm going now?"

Exercise 5

1) You've traced the idea that vaccinations may be linked to autism to an article in the medical journal *Lancet* which was officially repudiated and withdrawn in 2010. Now you want to go on to describe its continuing effects in the rest of your essay. Write a transition paragraph of two or three sentences to signal that change. Moving from how the original article was discredited to how it continues to be influential involves a contrast, so your transition may well begin with a connecting word like *but, however*, or *nevertheless*.

2) You are writing about the decline in teenage pregnancies since 1990. You've given several paragraphs each to statistics demonstrating the drop and exploring reasons for it such as economic recession, a trend toward later marriage, and reality shows featuring pregnant teens. Now you want to talk about effective sex education programs. Write a transition paragraph of two or three sentences to introduce the new topic. This one will be an "and" transition. It might include words like *moreover, furthermore*, or, if this is your last stop, *finally*.

3) This time the topic is octopus intelligence. You've talked about how octopuses' nerve cells outnumber those of many mammals and how their brains are shaped into specialized lobes, and you've described octopus play and the way they discriminate by selecting the easiest prey available. You want to conclude with your strongest evidence, a dramatic experiment in which octopuses learned to open tricky locked boxes. Write a transition paragraph of two or three sentences to usher in this new account.

Reviewing and Revising

While most writers know they should revise the first versions of whatever they write, many think that all revision means is fixing mechanical errors. Of course, editing for details is important, but why? Details are only a small part of the big picture, and it's that big picture that counts the most. You don't sit down to write in order to prove you can make your subjects and verbs agree. You want to communicate certain ideas to a particular audience. Have you done that? Can you do it better? Those are the big questions to consider before getting down in the weeds.

How to go about it? It helps to have a routine. Say you've finished a draft of an essay. You've been laboring away writing one sentence, one word, at a time, and now you've reached the end. Step back. Take a walk. Have a cup of coffee. If you dive back into the text now, all you'll see is one sentence, one word, at a time. You need a fresh eye.

Ok, you're back. Take out your original notes—main idea, six questions, terms to explain, idea tree outline—and recall what you set out to do. Now enlist your imaginary reader and go back over the whole piece. It may be hard at first, but don't stop and correct little grammar or word choice problems. Concentrate on the big picture. Have you done all you could to make your main idea clear and acceptable? Have you explained any difficult terms or concepts? Have you covered all the branches of your idea tree and laid out your thinking plainly enough to satisfy Samuel L. Jackson or Steven King? Be honest. Are there still places where a reader like one of them could ask *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* or *"So what?"* If there are, fix those now, before your final edit.

Try to be flexible, too. Thinking once again of the big picture—the overall effect of your essay on a competent reader—consider the order of your paragraphs. It may be that one section of the piece would work better in another place. Word processing makes changes of this sort

easy. If you do shuttle things around, though, go back and read the relocated pieces in context. It may be you need further adjustments to make them fit in the new spot. Look too at the beginning of each paragraph. Have you made it clear how it arises from what went before? You may have more than one paragraph cluster. If so, the transitions between these chunks of the essay may need special attention.

When you honestly think your coverage, logic, and organization are enough to satisfy the reader you've been imagining, it's time to go back to the beginning of your piece and work out the stylistic and mechanical kinks. There will be some. Once more, it's useful to think of each category separately.

By far the larger part of this book has been about writing style, so with any luck you know what to watch for there. In particular, look back at Chapter 1, "The Sentence As the Foundation of Style," and see how your wiriting stacks up against its advice. Pay special attention to issues that have given you trouble in the past. Perhaps you tend to make inanimate objects or abstractions the subjects of your sentences or to use weak verbs or to slip into a dull pattern of long or short sentences. Flag and fix any problems of that kind. Look for words you can cut out, vague word choices you can sharpen, sentences you can rework for better cohesion, misplaced emphasis, or stretches of monotonous rhythms or sentence structures. As always, watch especially for problems you know you're prone to.

Finally, with all these large issues taken care of, sharpen your red pencil, put on your proofreader hat, and comb through your work for mechanical mistakes to correct. It's an excellent idea to list the mistakes you find, perhaps in the same place you put your six questions. Some of them may be one-offs, but others may point to issues you should be aware of. Two good things flow from knowing you tend to confuse *lay* and *lie,* for instance, or to write unintentional

sentence fragments: you'll spot the problem more often so you can fix it, and the oftener you fix it, the less likely it is to persist.

A Note on Documentation

Chapter 3 has a good bit to say on what kinds of computer research need to be credited to your sources, along with examples of acceptable and unacceptable borrowing . The same rules apply to printed sources, as does the advice found there about how to blend researched material with the rest of your text so the seams don't show. By all means use the library or the Internet to the full. You'd be hurting yourself not to, even for writing that doesn't specifically require it. But tread carefully. Make sure you treat sources fairly and adapt an document them correctly.

Your Writing

Reread something you've written in the past in light of the advice in this chapter. Does the introduction make the topic clear and anticipate your approach? Does it present you, the writer, in a favorable light? Are the middle paragraphs clearly related to each other and to your overall purpose? Is the organization sound? Did you follow conventional modes for processes, descriptions, comparisons, and the like? Otherwise, does one paragraph flow from questions raised by another, and did you save your strongest points for last? Did you provide enough transitions to keep an imaginary reader from getting lost? Does the piece accomplish what you set out to do for the readers you had in mind? Be honest. Do you see gaps in your thinking or weak points that need more support? Finally, are there spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors that needed fixing?

Checklist

1. Use your opening paragraph to introduce yourself and your subject to the readers you have in mind. This opening does not have to state your thesis in so many words.

2. Generate middle paragraphs by putting yourself in the reader's place and asking, *"What's that?" "How so?" "For instance?" "How do you know?" "Why?"* or *"So what?"* about what has come before.

3. Arrange essays or parts of essays that involve a process, a narrative, a description, a comparison, or a cause and effect relationship in conventional patterns. For more open forms, let your imaginary reader and six questions guide you from one paragraph to the next.

4. Plant signposts—transitional words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs—throughout your work wherever you think a reader might miss the connection. Rely on your imaginary reader to keep you from going overboard and posting too many.

5. Review and revise all your work with an eye to how it would strike your imaginary reader, working from the bigger picture first to small details last.