

for eventually I hope to turn the subject into a different kind of travel book about the Middle East when I'm able to take another trip. Trying to explain what happened to writing friends, I described the process as the complete opposite of the traditional way of doing a piece; that is, standing back far enough to get an objective look at the material. In Open-Ended Writing, when I arrived at that first center, it was like standing in the middle of a circle, looking out and not being able to see the whole thing, but feeling quite excited about what I might see next if I turned just a bit more. What a different way to look at a subject. It's a bit scary too. Must be how a sculptor feels when he first starts to chip away.

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After you have your vision of your final piece and after you have worked out that vision in a new draft—perhaps starting with an outline—you need of course to revise and polish your way to your final draft. Sometimes the open-ended writing process yields a draft that needs little revising, sometimes lots. (See Section III for options in revising.)

Main Steps in the Open-ended Writing Process

- Write for fifteen or twenty minutes without stopping. Start with whatever comes first to mind or perhaps with some particular topic you've been wanting to write about. But make sure to let the writing go wherever it wants to go.
- Pause and find the center or focus or main point in what you wrote. Write it down in a sentence.
- Use that focusing sentence for a new burst of nonstop writing. Again, let the writing go wherever it wants to go. Invite yourself gradually or suddenly to lose sight of whatever you started with.
- Again, pause and focus and write down the focusing sentence.
- Keep up this alternating cycle till you get to the piece of writing that is in you that wants to get written.
- Find a way to write it: perhaps you already have; perhaps you need to start in with a fresh draft; perhaps you need to make an outline or plan before you start a draft.
- The open-ended writing process is most useful if you sense you have something to write but don't quite know what it is; and if you are willing to allow for time and chaos while it develops.

The Loop Writing Process

I've described the two ends of the spectrum of writing processes. One extreme is the dangerous method of painstaking writing where you figure out your meaning entirely before you start and thereby maintain complete control while you write. (Not quite so far in that direction is the direct writing process where, by and large, you maintain control of where you are going.) The other extreme is the open-ended process where you let the writing steer itself and let yourself be ignorant of where you might end up. The dangerous method may save you time and perplexity but it often gets you in trouble or leads to dull thinking. Open-ended writing maximizes growth in yourself and new thinking on paper but you pay the obvious price in time, energy, and uncertainty.

The loop writing process is a way to get the best of both worlds: both control and creativity. On the one hand it lets you steer where you are going. Perhaps, for example, you have to write an essay on the causes of the French Revolution and the teacher won't accept a novel or love letter instead. But on the other hand it expands your point of view—sometimes even more than the open-ended process does; it generates copious new thinking; and it is a way to *focus* that creativity on goals other than the ones you happen to carry around inside you. Thus it is especially useful if you can't think of much to write or are stuck with a topic that bores you. The loop writing process will take you longer than the direct writing process, but not so long as open ended writing. (I will write as though your task were an essay or some other kind of non-

fiction writing. It will be obvious how to apply the loop writing process to poems, stories, or plays.)

I call this process a loop because it takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, *the voyage out*, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space—allow yourself, that is, to ignore or even forget exactly what your topic is. For the second half, *the voyage home*, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced during the voyage out. Where open-ended writing is a voyage of discovery to a new land, the loop process takes a circling route so you can return to the original topic—but now with a fresh view of it. Where open-ended writing is only suitable if you have free choice over the topic and form, loop writing is useful if you have *no choice*—and especially if you hate it or feel bored by it.

The loop writing process is really my response to something many people told me about *Writing Without Teachers*: that what I said about, “well, growing and cooking” was all very well for creative writing but it didn’t help them to write an essay on the causes of the French Revolution for Monday morning. At first this response made me mad. “Yes, it *does* help,” I wanted to say. “Everything you need is right there. I was thinking very much about just such a task.” But after hearing the response often enough I finally had to admit I hadn’t given as many directions as I could have for using fast and free writing on required essays, memos, or reports that you may not be interested in. When I finally gave in and set about trying to write what these people were asking for, the process led me to new ideas. I tell this story as a lesson in feedback. So often when readers complain that something is missing in a piece of your writing, you *know* they are wrong. But if you can finally manage to see it through their eyes, to have some of their experience, you don’t just get new perceptions of your writing, you usually get completely new ideas that please you.

The creative element in the loop writing process comes from letting your topic slide half out of mind and doing some initial bursts of directed raw writing. This gets more of your *experience* linked to your thinking. Some teachers have objected, “Why encourage unskilled writers to put *more* into their essays when they can’t even handle the little that is there?” But I have found that people pro-

duce their best writing when they finally have ideas that are powerful and exciting to them. When they try to weave an essay out of ideas that are watery and uninteresting to them, their language often disintegrates into incoherence: they are trying to make something solid out of what they know isn’t really worth the effort. How can you reason well and produce strong language if you aren’t connected to the topic and don’t have any ideas that excite you? After you have that connection and after you have produced lots of writing that interests you, then you will be willing to summon the cold, hard discipline needed for the voyage home—for building an organized and focused piece of writing.

The Voyage Out

For the voyage out I suggest thirteen procedures for loop writing: directed freewriting. I will explain and discuss them before going on to describe the voyage home. You won’t need all of them for any one piece of writing. Usually a few are enough. But if you practice them all you will have them all available and know which will be most suitable for any given writing task you face.

1. *First thoughts*. This is a good one to start with. Do it even before you have done any reading, research, planning, or new thinking about your topic. Just put down as fast as you can all the thoughts and feelings you happen to have about the topic. You will discover much more material than you expected. And not just feelings and memories either: there are probably solid facts and ideas you forgot you had.

Writing down first thoughts is more or less what you did during the first half of the direct writing process, and for some topics you will turn up enough material with first thoughts for your whole piece of writing. If so, go on to revising. Your ideas won’t be as numerous or interesting as they would have been if you used some of the techniques I describe below, but you will have saved a lot of time and effort.

If it seems to you that you don’t have any first thoughts, you are mistaken. It is because you aren’t listening or accepting them. That is, I’m not calling for *good* thoughts or *true* thoughts—just *first* thoughts. If you have trouble, adopt the frame of mind of a scientist and simply record the reactions and thoughts that pass

through consciousness as you struggle with the topic. More often you will have too many rather than too few first thoughts. Take the ones that appeal most.

If you are writing some kind of analysis or description—perhaps an evaluation of a person or a program, a write-up of a case, an abstract of a long article—first thoughts will often consist of certain details or incidents simply jumping out from your memory. You may not know why. They may seem senseless or random but they are not. These first tiny details and quick impressions often hold the key to important insights that you would miss if you proceeded straight to careful analytic thinking.

If you are having a particularly hard time making up your mind between two or three opinions—perhaps you are writing a report on two competing proposals, an essay on conflicting theories, a piece of personal writing to help you decide whether to break up with someone—first thoughts are particularly valuable. “What do you *think* you should do? Give an instant answer.” “Which plan do you suspect you’ll endorse in the end? First thoughts.” Because these are naked hunches that lack any clear justification or support, you often feel shy about taking them seriously, much less writing them down. But you should. It’s not that you can trust these hunches to be right (though surprisingly often they are: your instantaneous-computer-mind has taken everything into account and cranked out a judicious answer). But the slower, careful thinking you need for *deciding* if your hunch is right will go much better because you wrote it down blatantly: “Jung’s account feels better than Freud’s. Jung’s feels . . . while Freud’s feels . . .” Of course your hunch may be wrong but if so, it turns out that writing it down bluntly somehow helps you to abandon it more easily than if you leave it lurking in the back of your mind.

Spend at least fifteen minutes of nonstop writing on first thoughts even if the process seems a waste of time. Take longer of course if the material seems good. But don’t spend any time at this early stage trying to get your thoughts correctly ordered or reconciled with each other. Just get them all down as quickly as you can.

2. *Prejudices*. This, too, is a good one to start with—even before reading, thinking, or researching your topic. What are your biases in the area of your topic. With the example of the Jung/Freud first thoughts above, I was obviously illustrating prejudices too. What kind of explanation of the French Revolution would be most *satis-*

fyng to you? Do you suspect that monarchy is an inherently unjust form of government? That royalty was really the root cause of the revolution? Do you feel that mobs always do the wrong thing? Or that “the people” are always right in the end? That intellectuals are trouble-makers? If you are writing to persuade someone or a committee to adopt a certain policy, write out your naked prejudices and preferences before you do any careful thinking. It will help you see the difference between your biases and your genuine arguments—something you need to see if you want to persuade effectively.

If it isn’t clear to you what your prejudices or preferences are, do first thoughts and then—in a somewhat detached and clinical spirit—look through what you’ve written to see what point of view or assumptions or biases are revealed there. But then jump with both feet *into* that point of view and write in as prejudiced a way as you can. You aren’t trying to think carefully, you’re trying to let your own prejudices run rampant without any censorship so you can see more clearly what they are. If it is hard to stop censoring, pretend to be *someone else* who is an extremist. Write his views.

Even if your topic seems more a matter of facts than of opinion—perhaps you are writing an environmental impact statement—it is still helpful to write prejudices. Prejudice and point of view are even more slippery in issues of fact. Perhaps you can’t find a prejudice in yourself to exaggerate if you are writing, for example, about the effects of widening a road on the adjoining area of the county. But even if you do lack overt prejudices, you still have a whole web of assumptions and preconceptions of which you are probably unaware but which you can learn about if you write as though you *were* someone who is very prejudiced on the issue—perhaps someone who lives on the road and feels strongly against the widening. By taking a point of view as different as possible from your own, and really trying to enter into it as seriously as you can, you will begin to notice your own unconscious assumptions as they begin to be violated. You do best of all, perhaps, if you take two or three different points of view—one of them your own “objective” view—and write an argument among them. (See Number 4, *Dialogues*, below.)

Writing down your prejudices also helps you generate new ideas and insights. It’s only by being obsessed with an idea, taking it as far as you can and seeing it everywhere, that you will notice all the

arguments and evidence that support it. Copernicus wouldn't have found the evidence for the heliocentric model of the planets if he hadn't been obsessed with the importance of the sun and given some scope to his obsession. In addition, when you give more scope to your prejudice you will be led to notice more ideas that run *counter* to it that you wouldn't otherwise have seen. That is, you will start to pay attention to what an opponent would say. This helps you think of better arguments for your own point of view.

3. *Instant Version*. It would be a miracle to turn out a final version of any extensive writing task in half an hour. But it's worthwhile pretending to pull off this miracle. Simply deny the need for research, thinking, planning and turn out a kind of sketch of your final piece—an instant projected version. You'll have to pretend you know things you don't know, act as though you have made up your mind where you're uncertain, make up facts and ideas, and leave out large chunks (perhaps symbolizing these omissions with little boxes). But by doing so you can *will* yourself into producing a quickly written final version.

Some people are paralyzed by the process of extensive research for a major report or paper. The more research you do, the more impossible it is to start writing. You already have so much material—whether it is in your head or in your notes—that you can't find a place to start, you can't find a beginning to grab hold of in that tangled ball of string. You can write more notes but you can't start. Besides, you never feel you have finished your research: there are a couple more books or articles to get a hold of; they sound promising; better not write anything yet because they probably have some very important material that will change the whole picture. This is the path to panicked 3 A.M. writing the night before the due date. (Or the night after.) Writing first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version keeps you from falling into this research paralysis. Have the sense to realize that it's easier to write now when you know less. You can use subsequent research to check your thinking and to revise your writing to any level of sophistication that you wish.

If you do write first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version—and especially if you use a couple of these techniques—you will be able to get much more out of any reading and research you have to do for your paper. The more boring or difficult the research, the more helpful these early pieces of writing. They will

make dull research interesting because you will already be an “authority” on the topic: you will already have lots of thoughts and a point of view. You will find yourself interested and alert as you read to see when the other authorities are smart enough to agree with your prejudices and when they get off track. When they come up with data or thinking that is new to you, it will be interesting and energizing. In short, your mind will already have a “set” or receptive net which will help you absorb all this otherwise dull information. You won't be in that demoralizingly passive position of doing research with your mouth hanging open and trying to take in *everything*. You'll remember more with fewer notes.

You will also discover, by the way, how close you often come to valid conclusions and sound arguments *before* you have consulted the data and arguments of others. You end up feeling much more powerful. It gets you out of that helpless position where you feel you cannot write anything unless you find out what all the “authorities” have said—a frame of mind that seduces you into one of the major forms of poor writing: writing that merely summarizes what “they” say. First thoughts, prejudices, and instant versions catapult you into a position of initiative and control so that you use reading and research to check and revise your thinking actively, not passively just to find something to think.

Even if your research is purely quantitative, these early-writing procedures will help a lot. Perhaps you are writing about levels of pollution of various chemicals in Puget Sound; or about government expenditures for various kinds of armaments and “defense.” Write an instant version by making up your own numbers (based either on intuition or fantasy) and reaching your own conclusions. Afterward you'll do a much better job of seeing, remembering, and understanding the real numbers when you turn to the dull research.

These three early-writing procedures have another benefit that is especially important when the paper is difficult for you. Even experienced and professional writers often waste a lot of energy with old and sometimes unconscious fears of “This one's too hard, I won't be able to think of anything to say this time, I'll be a failure.” After you have written first thoughts or prejudices or an instant version, these old feelings can't trouble you so much because you don't, in a sense, have to “write a paper,” you just have to “revise a paper”: change some numbers, add some sections, reverse some

conclusions, perhaps even adjust the whole organization. That's all. Even though you may start with a short, sketchy, disorganized paper consisting entirely of fantasy thoughts and information, it is still a sort of paper. And more often than not, there are strong parts that you will keep in your final version. You have already performed the essential inner miracle that makes all writing mysterious and difficult: you have created something out of nothing.

4. *Dialogues.* If you discover that instead of having one clear prejudice you have two or three conflicting feelings, you are in a perfect position to write a dialogue. Give each of the feelings a voice and start them talking to each other. Keep your pencil moving and stand out of the way and these voices will have a lot to say that is important for your piece. You will probably discover somewhere along the way *who* these people are: perhaps one is your head and the other is your heart or guts; perhaps one is your mother who always saw things in terms of individuals, and the other is your father who always saw things in terms of their public consequences. Perhaps one voice is someone especially wise or perceptive who once gave you a glimpse of how things could be. It will probably help your dialogue writing to give these voices their right names and actually be these people as you write in each voice. But don't get side-tracked into wondering what these people would actually say: just keep them talking. If the effort to be these people slows down your writing, go back to the nameless dialogue you started with.

But I'm not recommending that you always do dialogues before you have engaged in research or thought about your topic. They are also especially valuable afterward. They help you to digest and understand all that thinking, research, and early writing and help you to come up with conclusions. After you have read about Louis XVI and Voltaire, get them talking and arguing with each other about the causes of the French Revolution. Let others join the conversation: a peasant, a courtier, one or two of the authors you have read on the topic, yourself, whoever might have something to say. Or get that homeowner who objects to having the road widened talking to a land developer—but not just off the tops of their heads this time: pretend they know all this specific data you've turned up in your research on environmental impact and watch them help you interpret it as they argue.

The main principle of dialogue writing is that you don't have to

know ahead of time what a person is going to say. Just pick the speakers, get them talking, and see what they do say. They will often surprise you by saying things you've never thought of. For though you may know everything that two old friends of yours might say on some topic if you just wrote solitary monologues for each of them, you don't know all they will say if you start them interacting with each other. Arguments are especially fertile ground for new insights.

It's sometimes helpful to pick people whose opinions are not completely obvious to you. If, for example, you have the feeling that you already know everything Louis XVI will say about the French Revolution, don't pick him, pick some courtier whose opinions will be related but slightly unpredictable. But don't worry about this issue: even if you think you already know what Louis XVI or your mother will say, they will come up with new and surprising things under the circumstances of a real dialogue. Think of a dialogue as an invitation to the unexpected and spontaneous.

Part of the power of dialogues comes from using the language of *speech* and *talking* and getting away from "essay language" which is usually more cumbersome and artificial and farther away from your felt perceptions. Therefore, make sure you *talk on paper*. It is important to sit inside each person's head in turn and actually write down the words that come out of that person's mouth. This means you'll probably write down lots of little words and phrases that occur in speech which don't contain much substantive meaning—phrases like "Well, um, maybe," or "You have a point there," or "I don't know, let me think about that," and so on. These are the phrases that occur when a person is in the middle of a conversation but isn't quite sure for a moment exactly what he thinks. That's exactly the position you should be in as you write your dialogue. Unless you write down what the people *say*, you won't actually get yourself into their heads and get the benefit of their thinking and points of view. Their "speech" is what they are, and since you need them to get the benefit of their thinking, you need their speech. Besides it's more fun just to let a real conversation unfold than to look for ideas or arguments. (And it helps all your writing to keep it in contact with the rhythms and textures of speech.)

Dialogues are especially useful if you have trouble writing analytically (which means you probably have trouble writing essays

and reports). Writing a dialogue produces reasoning, but produces it spontaneously out of your feelings and perceptions. Get two people arguing with each other on paper—or give your opponent a voice so he can argue with you on paper—and you will naturally produce arguments: assertions, supporting reasons, and evidence. Since you are producing them in the heat of battle with your opponent interrupting you and perhaps changing arguments in mid-stream, they may be disordered or flawed, but you will nevertheless already have written most of the ingredients you need for an intelligent and muscular train of reasoning.*

5. *Narrative Thinking*. If your topic is confusing to you—if for example you find your mind shifting from one thought to another or from one point of view to another without any sense of which thought or point of view makes more sense—then simply write the *story of your thinking*. “I thought this, then I thought that,” and so on. This process can help untangle bad snarls in your mind. It is especially useful if you are having trouble writing about something very complicated. If, for example, you are trying to analyze a tangled movie plot or a confusing legal case, move into the strict narrative mode and tell what happened and how you reacted; for example, “She described what happened to her and why she deserved to be repaid and I thought she was right, but when he answered I agreed with him, but then I began to change my mind again when I thought of. . . .” Needless to say you may not want your final version in this narrative mode—it’s very slow—but this early narrative writing can help you finally see the issue clearly enough so you can write something very tight and to the point. In particular it often helps you notice unconscious assumptions that have trapped you.

6. *Stories*. The best way to write a letter of recommendation or a job analysis or an evaluation of a person or project is to start by letting stories and incidents come to mind and jotting them down very briefly: good stories and bad ones, typical stories and unusual ones, funny stories and, best of all, stories that somehow stick in your mind for reasons you cannot pin down. This will spare you

* Part of the reason why inexperienced essay writers benefit so little from the corrections of teachers on their essays is because the teacher is usually trying to correct *flaws* in an argument, while the student hasn’t yet learned simply to *engage* in sustained argument by himself on paper. The student experiences the feedback as a double-bind: “You ask me to engage in sustained, abstract solitary reasoning—something that is difficult for me—and when I do it you punish my behavior.”

from that awful dullness so characteristic of evaluations and reports: empty generalizations and dead lists of qualities or adjectives. Each story will have a lively insight for you and most of those insights—especially the ones that grow out of the perplexing stories—will be far more useful than what you come up with when you just try to *think* about the person or the project or the job. In addition you can include some scraps of these stories in your final version to make it more clear and alive. Letters of recommendation are most useful if they include examples of actual incidents.

As you think through your reading about the French Revolution, what stories or incidents come to mind? Some will be obviously important and illustrative. But stand out of the way and let others simply occur to you. They won’t all be from your reading. Perhaps the plight of the royalty or the peasantry reminds you of situations you were in. Perhaps the behavior of the urban poor reminds you of something you once did. Write these associations down. Try, in addition, to think of stories and incidents related to theoretical or structural elements in the topic. For example, what stories strike you about *causes*: occasions when one thing caused another but it seemed different from what you usually think of as a cause; perplexing arguments you’ve had about whether or not you caused something; cases where something had no cause or too many causes?

Write down these stories and events briefly and in a thumbnail way. You are trying to record as many as you can as quickly as you can. If there is a long and complex story, run through it in your head and write down a summary version in a long paragraph. You can use strings of phrases instead of whole sentences, but do include details. The effectiveness of this loop writing procedure stems from dredging up lots of rich concrete detail from your memory. You want to get your mind working on the narrative and experiential level, and away from saying, “What are my *thoughts* about the causes of the French Revolution?” The previous loop writing procedures will give you thoughts. Now you want your mind asking, “What are my *memories* and *experiences* that somehow relate to the French Revolution?” There is plenty of precious knowledge locked away in your narrative and experiential memory that you can’t get to by thinking. Many wise people do their best thinking by telling stories.

Learn to trust yourself. Learn that the stories and events that in-

trigue you in connection with your topic will end up useful to you later. Practice this technique so you can end up with at least three or four pages containing at least fifteen or twenty stories or events briefly told. Sometimes the material you come up with is so obviously important that you know you should devote more time to get it all.

7. *Scenes*. Stop the flow of time and take still photographs. Focus on individual moments. What places, moments, sounds, or moods come to mind in connection with the French Revolution? Not only from your reading, but also from your own experience. Assume that they will be important if they come to mind, especially if they stick in mind.

If you are trying to decide on a career or choose between two people or life situations, jot down as many scenes as you can think of from your past when things were going well or you were functioning well. Then note just as many bad ones. Afterwards read through these scenes and you will be able to reach some really trustworthy judgments about your skills and strengths and what you need to function at your best; and your weaknesses and what you should try to avoid.*

It is particularly valuable to use scenes if you are writing some kind of analysis of a novel, story, poem, or movie. What moments, sights, and sounds stick in your mind from the work? This will give you insights about where some of the centers of gravity are. What structure emerges when you look at all these snapshots together? Add scenes from the rest of your experience that come to mind. These will lead you to important insights about the work under analysis and about your own preconceptions and point of view.

8. *Portraits*. Think about your topic and see what people come to mind. Give thumbnail portraits of them: again not necessarily with full syntax; just phrases will do. Tell the qualities or characteristics of these people that stick in mind, such as their physical appearance, odd movements or posture or gait, intriguing qualities, things they said or did. Some portraits will have obvious relevance to your analysis. But see who else comes to mind as you muse about your topic: people from other areas of your experience who pop up in your train of reflection. Have faith that there is something useful in the fact that your third grade teacher comes to

* I first learned this useful tactic from Gail Martin.

mind as you think about the causes of the French Revolution. Tell what particular things you remember about this teacher and later on you will probably reap an insight.

If you are trying to evaluate an organization or analyze a novel, portraits will often lead you immediately to your best insights. If you are trying to make a hard personal decision, portraits of important people in your life will help you see what matters most to you and separate it from what's merely attractive or tempting.

9. *Vary the audience*. Write about your topic to someone very different from the real audience of your paper. If your audience is sophisticated, try writing to someone very unsophisticated, perhaps to a young child. If the audience is someone you don't know, write to a close friend. If the audience has a definite point of view about the topic, write to someone with the opposite view. If you are having trouble writing a letter of recommendation for a friend who is applying for a job, put aside for a while the question of what you want to say to the employer and do a freewriting letter to your friend telling him bluntly everything you feel about him.

If you have difficulty varying the audience, try actually visualizing these alternate audiences you are writing to; address them by name periodically in your writing as though you were actually talking to them. If you are one of the many people who tend in general to forget about their audience and write to sort-of-nobody-in-particular, your writing probably tends to be dead. Practice visualizing your audience as you write—your real audience and some of these alternate audiences.

The act of writing to a different audience doesn't just clarify your thinking. It also leads you to new insights. If you have to write a job description for a very bureaucratic audience, but you start by writing it to your children or your parents or to a close friend who has no connection with your workplace, you will find yourself noticing important aspects of the job you are trying to analyze that you never would have noticed if you just wrote to the official audience. Write about the causes of the French Revolution as though you were Mao Tse-tung giving advice to revolutionaries or as though you were Kissinger writing a memo to the rest of the government about how to prevent revolution. You will have new insights.

10. *Vary the writer*. As you vary the audience, you often naturally vary the writer. Each device has its own power to generate

new insights. Write as though you were someone whose view on the topic is very different from your own. Or write as though you lived in a different culture. If you are analyzing a particular policy, pretend to be someone affected by it. If you are writing about a particular person—perhaps an essay about a historical character or an evaluation of a client or colleague—it is enormously fruitful to *be* that person and write a *self*-portrait or *self*-analysis. Again you will learn things you didn't know. If you are writing about a novel or poem or movie, *be* one of the people in it and see what he or she has to say. Or be the author and give your understanding of your own creation.

11. *Vary the time.* Write as though you were living in the past or the future. Write, for example, about the French Revolution as though you were living at the time or as though it hadn't happened yet but you had an intuition of its possibility. Write as though the *topic* were in a different time: if you are writing about civil disobedience or the relationship between the sexes, write about the topic in the distant past or future. Similarly, try writing to an *audience* in the past or the future.

Varying the audience and the writer and the time is particularly fruitful if you can't think of anything to say about your topic, or if everything you think of seems ordinary and obvious and uninteresting.

12. *Errors.* Write down things that are almost true or trying to be true; things that you are tempted to think or that others think but you know are false; dangerous mistakes. "People only take care of things they own." "John is essentially lazy." "Revolutions are always part of progress." Writing these down lessens the static in your head. The process corrals your thinking bit by bit into a narrower and narrower space so that a sprawling, confusing issue slowly becomes clearer and more manageable.

13. *Lies.* Write down quickly all the odd or crazy things you can come up with. For example: "The French Revolution wasn't started by the Wobblies in Seattle, or by Lenin, or by Marx, or by the Marx brothers. It wasn't part of the women's movement. It didn't last forty days and nights, it isn't in the Bible, they didn't just get the enemy drunk and slide them into the sea." If you let the nonsense roll effortlessly for ten or fifteen minutes—spelling out some of the individual fantasies at more length, too—you can discover some ideas that will help your thinking even if they are

not true. (And they may be true. Could the French Revolution have been part of the women's movement?)

Writing down as many lies as you can as quickly as you can gives you glimpses of your unconscious mind. You will discover some important preoccupations and assumptions that relate to the topic. Many, of course, will be irrelevant, but if you are more aware of them you can think better about the topic. In addition, even if you cannot draw any conclusions from reading back over the nonsense you have written, the process of writing it all down serves to clear some of the fog in your mind that was confusing or slowing down your thinking. You often end up with renewed energy.

Applying These Looping Techniques

In most cases three or four of these techniques are enough to help you generate lots of good thinking on your topic. Occasionally, for hard cases, you'll need more. First thoughts, prejudices, and instant versions are good ways to get warmed up and creative at a very early stage in your writing. Perhaps errors, too. Dialogues, stories, scenes, and portraits are useful later, after you have done some of the research and thinking and early writing. Varying the audience, the time, and the writer is helpful at any stage in the writing. It is particularly useful for enlarging your point of view or getting yourself more personally invested in your topic.

Writing down your prejudices is particularly valuable if you are writing about an issue where opinion plays a major role such as politics or ethics—a topic like abortion. In your final paper you want to be *careful* in all the applications of that word: careful to look at the evidence, to argue well, to document your conclusions—careful, in short, not to let your prejudices fool you or blind you. Here you want to do the opposite. Sometimes it's only by relinquishing all care and seeing what spills out that you can really get a glimpse of your own assumptions and point of view from the outside. Only by doing so—by understanding your own frame of reference—can you deal well with difficult issues, whether your goal is to analyze objectively or to persuade subtly.

Dialogues are particularly helpful if you are having trouble finding a real issue, something to quarrel about or get involved in—if you seem to have nothing but a whole bundle of thoughts that are true but uninteresting. A dialogue generates tension and energy. A

dialogue is also ideal if you have to do some kind of compare-and-contrast analysis: you can get the two proposals or candidates or poems or modes of government to talk to each other and fight about their differences.

If you have to analyze a novel or work of art of some sort, stories, scenes, and portraits help you notice hidden structures or centers of energy behind the surface of the work. Errors are useful for a topic you find so confusing that your head spins. Vary the audience, the writer, and the time when you are trying to digest and make sense out of what you know. These techniques also help in revising, when you are trying to bring focus or organization to something that persists in sprawling all over the place.

But you may end up choosing among these techniques not on the basis of the kind of writing task you are engaged in but rather on the basis of your own temperament and skills. Some people, for example, are more comfortable and skilled when they write from experiences than when they write from thinking. They are better at writing stories, telling what they feel, describing specific sights, sounds, feels, and smells than they are at abstract reasoning, analysis, argument, and building trains of thought. If you are such a person you probably sound much duller when you write essays and reports than you actually are. But you will be able to get real perceptiveness and intelligence into conceptual writing if you use the experiential loop writing techniques: stories, scenes, and portraits. When you read over what you produce with these techniques, you will see that almost every piece contains a good insight which you can now easily put into the conceptual mode: "Oh, now I see what those two stories are telling me. I can trust John to do energetic, conscientious work when I give him a certain kind of direction, but when I don't, he just goofs off." Or "This poem keeps reminding me of a bittersweet memory of my own that seems very different from anything in the poem. I never would have called the poem melancholy, but pondering this memory and the poem together, I can finally see a faint undertone of melancholy in some of the images—faint, but important in explaining why the poem is powerful."

If you have the opposite temperament and love to reason and argue on paper, your essays or reports will benefit in a different way from using stories, scenes, and portraits. You will get more life into your arguments. Indeed your very taste and skill for rea-

soning may *undermine* your power to persuade readers if your arguments are too abstract—too little grounded in human experience. You may get out-argued, as it were, by people with poorer arguments. Stories, scenes, and portraits will give your arguments more of the experiential texture they need to work on flesh and blood readers. In addition, these loop techniques will simply give you *more* ideas than you usually get, even though you love reasoning. Reasoning itself is deductive. It only tells you more about what you already know. But writing stories, scenes, and portraits is a very inductive process and will lead you to new insights and new points of view you couldn't reach by reasoning alone.

The important thing is to try out all these devices. You will learn which ones work best for you in various circumstances. And you will probably develop variations and brand new devices that are particularly suited to your needs.

The Voyage Home

Many new insights and understandings will come to you as you engage in this writing on the voyage out, but don't demand them or struggle for them. If you want to end up with new insights, you have to allow yourself to *lose sight* of your topic during much of the voyage out. You are letting goals, meanings, and end-products slip partly out of mind in order to allow for restructurings of your mind and new points of view that would be impossible if you kept your eye on the goal all the time.

But the voyage home is a process of bending the curve back toward the original goal. Return, then, to full consciousness of what your goal is: think as precisely and consciously as you can about your topic and audience. If there was an assignment or guidelines, think about exactly how they were phrased. And think about exactly what you want to do to your audience, about what they expect, and about their relationship to you. Then go back over all that writing you did during the voyage out and look for useful ideas and insights.

For in the voyage home, obviously enough, you are engaged in the process of revising. You have used your creative mentality to generate lots of examples and ideas and the makings of ideas, and now you need to use your critical mentality to shape a coherent draft out of this raw writing. You can choose among various

methods for revising: I have already described quick revising in Chapter 5 and other ways are in Section III, "More Ways To Revise."

I usually start by just reading it all through without doing any writing at all—just to immerse myself in one jump in all the writing I have done from so many different points of view and in so many different modes and moods. Perhaps I mark the margin of what feel like especially good or important bits, or even jot down some notes when the reading makes me think of something new I'm afraid I'll forget. But this first read-through gives me the lay of the land. Sometimes by simply reading through everything you have written, you will see very clearly what you want for your main point and what all the other points are. But sometimes you won't see yet how to turn it into a draft.

For it is probably fair to say that the loop writing process, especially if you use it for a piece of expository or conceptual writing, makes more of a mess than the other writing processes. With the dangerous method and the direct writing process you keep your eye on the goal at all times. With the open-ended process you probably arrive gradually at your final piece of writing. With the loop writing process you may have to struggle harder for order.

For one thing you probably have to throw more away. A generative process as creative as this one will inevitably turn up more insights than you can logically or comfortably fit in one piece of work. You will have to develop the strength to throw away some good material. And when you figure out your final train of thought, you will probably find some gaps you need to fill in.

In addition you may have to work harder to clarify some of the insights it has produced. That is, even though some of the insights will be sitting right there on the surface of your raw writing, some will only be potentially there. While you were writing some particular story or portrait that somehow seemed intriguing, you weren't in the best position to see the insight into the causes of the French Revolution. But now that you are thinking carefully about your topic and applying all these varied pieces of writing to it, you will usually see the insight.

A few pieces will persist in being obscure. You have a dialogue where the two speakers are at loggerheads and their disagreement yields you nothing but perplexity. What does it tell you about the suitability of this candidate for the job? About the trustworthiness

of your research on the environmental impact? You don't know. What is that story or portrait telling you about the causes of the French Revolution? Is it telling you to think about the influence of a certain person? Is it telling you to think about a certain meaning of the word *cause*? Some passages won't yield up their secrets. Get the ones you can and let the others go. Assume each has a meaning and think hard about what it might be, but after a while don't waste any more effort on it. Perhaps the meaning will pop up later as part of some other train of thought.

The loop writing process lends itself to a form of writing I call the collage which I describe in Chapter 14. I include there two collage essays which illustrate the use of ingredients produced by the loop writing process.

Summary of Loop Writing Procedures

- First thoughts.
- Prejudices.
- Instant version.
- Dialogues.
- Narrative thinking.
- Stories.
- Scenes.
- Portraits.
- Vary the audience.
- Vary the writer.
- Vary the time.
- Errors.
- Lies.
- The loop writing process is generally helpful in bringing life to conceptual writing and it is especially helpful if you feel bored or unconnected to your topic.