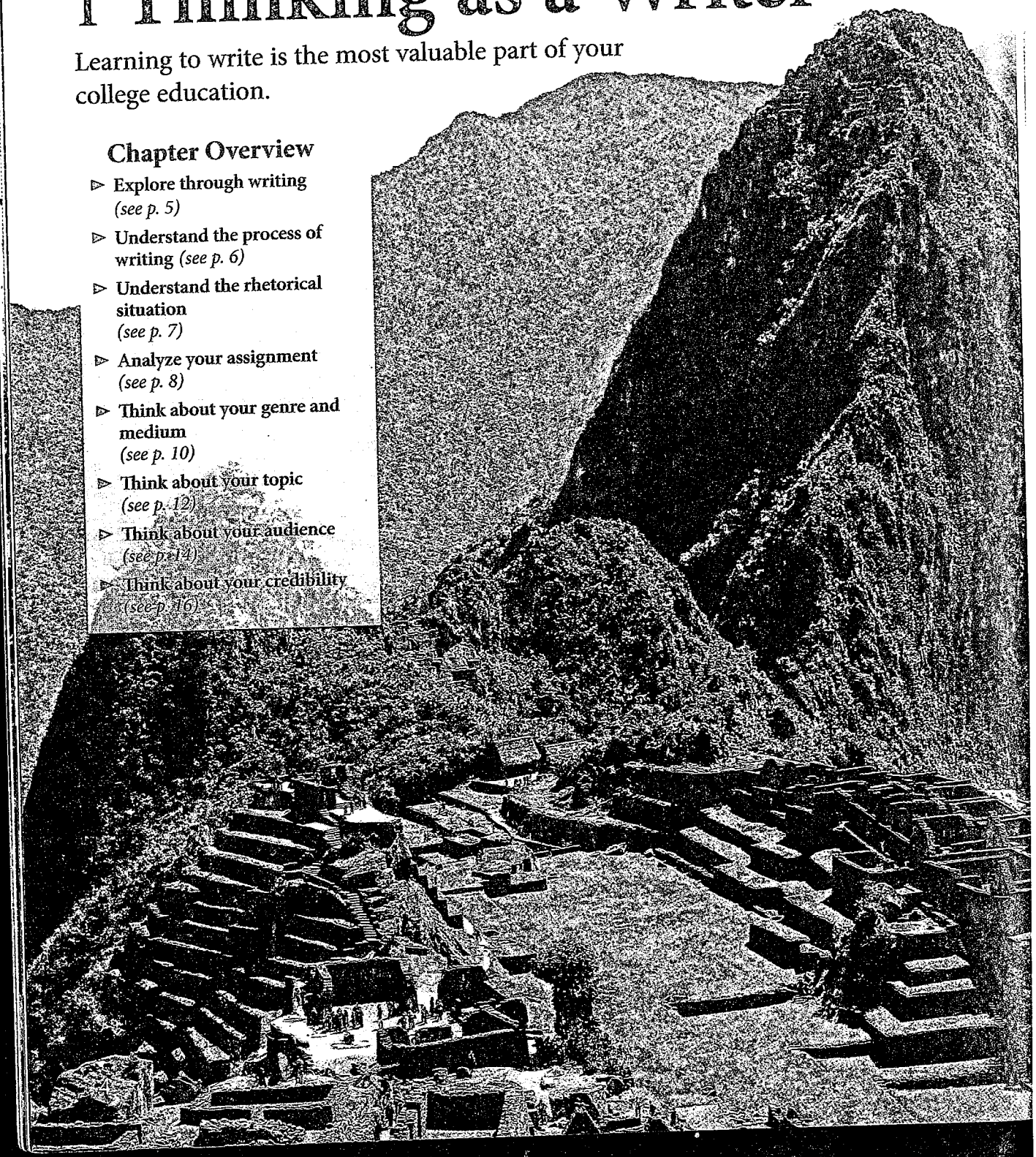
1 Thinking as a Writer

Learning to write is the most valuable part of your college education.

Chapter Overview



Explore Through Writing

From the earliest times in human history to the present, people have always wanted to know more, from finding out what was on the other side of the hill to finding out if life exists beyond our solar system. The effort to find new knowledge is an act of discovery. One of the best ways to discover is by writing.

PREPARING

Exploration begins with an impulse. Sometimes it's curiosity about a place. Sometime it's a hunch. The curiosity or the hunch takes the form of a question. To answer that question, we set out to explore.

As a writer in college you prepare by being open to the possibility of learning new things and revising your ideas as your writing develops.

EXPLORING

Ancient explorers were highly skilled navigators, but in order to find new lands and new peoples, they had to enter unknown regions.

College writers seldom create anything worth reading if everything is common knowledge at the outset. If you can connect what's new to what you know, however, entering the unknown can be a creative time for a writer.

RETURNING

Explorers are successful only if they return or send word back about what they discovered. They must make a difference in the minds of the people they left behind.

Through your writing, you can make a difference to others and enlarge the worlds of your readers.

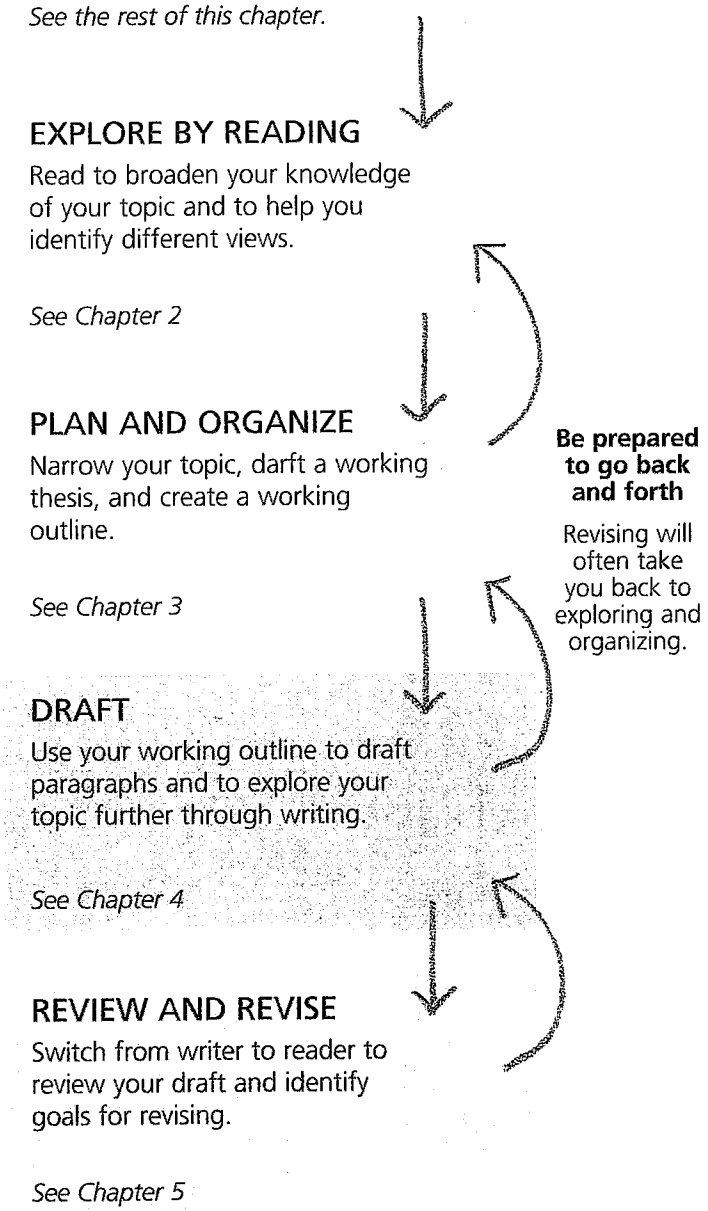
Understand the Process of Writing

People today write constantly in text messages, e-mail, social networking sites, chat rooms, and message boards, just to name a few. Most of this writing is composed quickly, read quickly, and discarded quickly.

In college, in the workplace, and in public life, however, you will often engage in writing that is composed slowly, read carefully, and stored for future reference. This more engaged kind of writing is similar to exploring in many ways. Indeed, Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that "the writer is an explorer. Every step is an advance into a new land."

Like explorers, writers prepare by assembling materials and establishing goals, they plan and organize, they explore by reading and writing, and they offer what they have learned to others.

But unlike explorers who travel to distant lands and have distinct stages in the process, writers intermingle different activities during writing. The process of writing may seem linear when described, but in practice, a diagram of how a writer actually works would look more like a plate of spaghetti. This messiness, however, often generates new ideas.



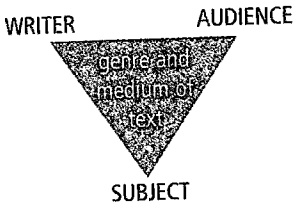
Understand the Rhetorical Situation

Successful writers understand that all acts of writing and speaking include three essential elements that interact with each other: the **writer** or speaker, the **subject**, and the **audience**. Every piece of writing is a negotiation among these three elements, even if we are jotting down a grocery list for our own use.

Every instance of writing, which we will define as **text**, is also of a particular category, called a **genre**, or a mixture of genres. Each text is delivered using a particular **medium**, or a combination of media. For example, Twitter messages (tweets) are a well-defined genre. They have to be text only and are limited to no more than 140 characters. The medium is digital.

The rhetorical triangle

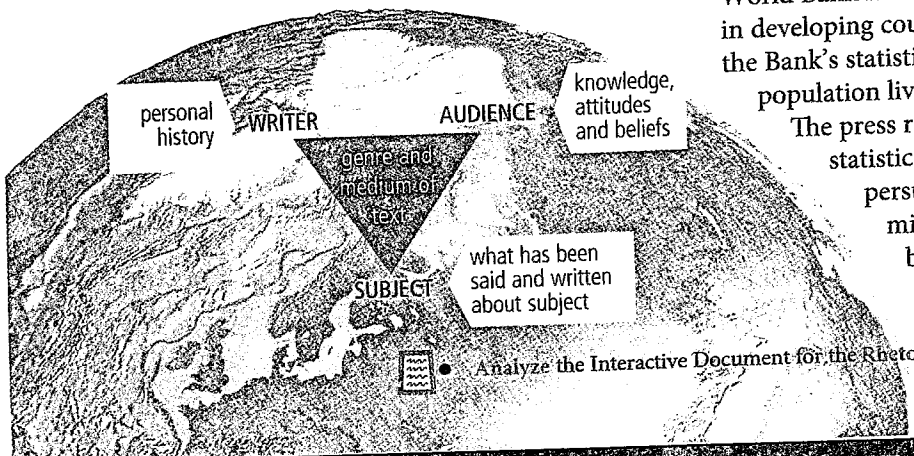
These elements—writer, audience, subject, and text—are often represented as a triangle



The rhetorical triangle can be used to determine a writer's **purpose** or **aim**. Writers who focus on their own personal experience have a primarily **reflective** aim. Those who are most concerned with explaining a subject have an **informative** aim. Writers who want their audiences to hold certain beliefs or take certain actions have a **persuasive** aim.

The larger context

Communication does not take place in a vacuum. Writers and readers both have knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about particular subjects. What is happening in the larger world has a great deal to do with how we understand a text.



Take, for example, the first two paragraphs of a press release from the World Bank issued in February 2011.

> **WASHINGTON, February 15, 2011** – Rising food prices have driven an estimated 44 million people into poverty in developing countries since last June as food costs continue to rise to near 2008 levels, according to new World Bank Group numbers released ahead of the G20 Meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors in Paris.
>
> "Global food prices are rising to dangerous levels and threaten tens of millions of poor people around the world," said World Bank Group President Robert B. Zoellick. "The price hike is already pushing millions of people into poverty, and putting stress on the most vulnerable, who spend more than half of their income on food."

This press release came from the public relations department of the World Bank and was published on the Bank's Web site.

The World Bank is an international financial institution that was established by wealthy countries to assist developing countries and to reduce poverty. It's not surprising that the World Bank is concerned with rising food prices in developing countries because, according to the Bank's statistics, over 20% of the world's population lives on less than $1.25 a day.

The press release is informative in giving statistics, but it is also making a persuasive case that the Bank's mission of reducing poverty will become more difficult if food prices continue to rise.

Analyze the Interactive Document for the Rhetorical Situation at mycomplab.com

Analyze Your Assignment

When your instructor gives you a writing assignment, look closely at what you are being asked to do. Circle the information about the required length, the due dates, the format, and other requirements. You can attend to these details later.

Make notes on the assignment sheet. You can find examples of eight different kinds of assignments listed on the facing page.

WHAT'S YOUR PURPOSE?

Does your assignment contain words like *reflect, describe, explain, analyze, evaluate, argue,* and *propose* that signal your purpose?

See next page.

WHAT'S YOUR TOPIC?

Do you have some freedom in choosing a topic? What interests you? What can you explore in depth in the length assigned?

See page 12.

WHAT'S YOUR GENRE AND MEDIUM?

Are you being asked to write an essay, another kind of written text, or a media project?

See page 10.

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

Does your assignment specify an audience? If so, what will they likely expect?

See page 14.

HOW DO YOU GAIN CREDIBILITY?

What can you do to make your readers trust you and believe that you know what you're talking about?

See page 16.

AIM	FOCUS	EXAMPLE GENRES
WRITING TO REFLECT	**Reflections:** Narrating personal experience and personal insights for a public audience *(Example assignment on page 92)*	Journals, personal letters, blogs, memoirs, essays
WRITING TO INFORM	**Observations:** Describing accurately and vividly	Ethnographies, travel accounts, case studies, photo essays
	Informative essays: Communicating information clearly *(Example assignment on page 136)*	Newspaper and magazine articles, academic articles, reports, profiles, essays
WRITING TO ANALYZE	**Rhetorical analysis:** Analyzing what makes a text successful and why the author made particular choices *(Example assignment on page 186)*	Rhetorical analysis, literary analysis, visual analysis, essays
WRITING TO PERSUADE	**Causal arguments:** Exploring why an event, phenomenon, or trend happened *(Example assignment on page 228)*	History, accident analysis, financial analysis, essays
	Evaluation arguments: Assessing whether something is good or bad according to particular criteria *(Example assignment on page 270)*	Reviews, essays, performance evaluations, product evaluations
	Position arguments: Convincing others through reasoned argument to accept or reject a position *(Example assignment on page 316)*	Speeches, letters to the editor, op-ed columns, editorials, essays
	Proposal arguments: Convincing others through reasoned argument to take action *(Example assignment on page 360)*	Speeches, business proposals, grant proposals, essays, advocacy Web sites

Think About Your Genre and Medium

Be aware of genre and medium

The word *genre* may be unfamiliar, but the idea isn't. Netflix and other online movie services classify movies as action and adventure, children and family, classics, comedy, documentary, drama, horror, musical, sci-fi and fantasy, thriller, and so on. The music industry classifies music as alternative, blues, classical, country, electronic, folk, gospel, hip hop/rap, jazz, Latino, reggae, rock, world, and so on. These are all genres. Of course, there are many subgenres within these broad genres.

Most of the time we recognize writing genres immediately. We know, for example, that junk mail is trying to sell us something and we're suspicious of anything offered for free. Likewise, we're accustomed to using different media. We read newspapers, magazines, and books online and on paper. We read written blogs on the Web and watch video blogs on YouTube.

But while we often don't think consciously about genre and medium when we are reading, listening, and viewing, when we write we often have to make conscious decisions according to genre and medium we choose.

Be aware of how genre and medium influence

The genre you select has a strong influence on the style you use. Compare the first paragraphs of a research report, a news article, and a blog on beach erosion.

Research report

Coastal management as a distinct practice emerged just a few decades ago, when ideas and information were exchanged through mostly conventional means. Scientists and coastal planners gave talks and presented posters at conferences and workshops, as they still do. Field trips and tours organized as part of these events highlighted problems and success stories. Agency experts prepared and distributed reports and guidelines. Academics researched problems and systematically evaluated methods to address them, reporting their results in new periodicals like the *Coastal Zone Management Journal*. Face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, the U.S. Postal Service, and later the fax machine played key roles in the development of ideas and movement of information to address coastal problems. Working with these communication tools, professionals and concerned citizens alike drew from their personal experience, new state and federal legislative mandates, and a palpable sense of urgency to create a new practice called coastal zone management. At the time, the demand was great for scientific data and information about coastal resources and use, for tools to interpret this information, and for strategies and processes to apply it for problem solving. And the information flowed freely, albeit by slower and less sophisticated means than today.

Innovation by Design: Improving Learning Networks in Coastal Management. Washington, D.C., The Heinz Center, 2004. Print.

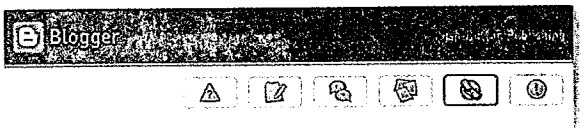
Watch the Animation on Genres and the Rhetorical Situation at mycomplab.com

News article

When scientists consider the possible effects of global warming, there is a lot they don't know. But they can say one thing for sure: sea levels will rise.

Dean, Cornelia. "New Victim of Global Warming: The Beaches." *New York Times*. New York Times. 20 June 2006. Web. 6 Oct. 2011.

Blog



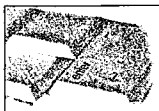
First it was the State Legislature in Albany. Then it was the County Legislature in Mineola.

Now, the dysfunction has spread to the Long Beach City Council, which voted last week—unanimously, no less—not to proceed with plans to protect the seashore of the barrier island on which this city by the sea is located.

"Legislative Dysfunction Under the Boardwalk." *Community Alliance Blog*. N.p. 8 May 2006. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

Even though each writer is writing about the same subject, notice what is different.

Sentence length	• The report has much longer sentences than the newspaper article or the blog.
Paragraph length	• The report has long paragraphs compared to the short paragraphs of the newspaper article and the blog.
Word choice	• The report uses much more formal language than the blog. The newspaper language is neutral.
Relationship with the reader	• The report and newspaper writers are distant and objective. The blog writer is passionately involved with the issue.



WRITE NOW

Compare styles across genres and media

Find a newspaper article on a current social, economic, political, or scientific issue. Then find a scholarly article on the same subject using scholar.google.com or one of the databases on your library's Web site. Next, search blogs for the same subject using blogsearch.google.com.

Compare the styles of the scholarly article, the newspaper article, and the blog using the following criteria: overall length, paragraph length, sentence length, word choice, relationship with the reader, and use of graphics and images. Write a summary of your analysis.

Think About Your Topic

Writers begin by exploring. When they start writing, exploration doesn't stop. Once they start, writers find things they could not have imagined. Where writers end up is often far away from where they thought they were going.

Most writing in college concerns exploration because academic disciplines seek to create new knowledge and to rethink what is known. Colleges and universities bring together people who ask interesting questions: How does recent archaeological evidence change our understanding of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Why does eyesight deteriorate with age? How do volcanoes affect the world climate? How do chameleons regenerate lost body parts? How do Rousseau's ideas about nature continue to shape notions about wilderness? How do electric eels generate voltage and not get shocked in the process? How can a poll of a thousand people represent over 300 million Americans with only a 3% margin of error?

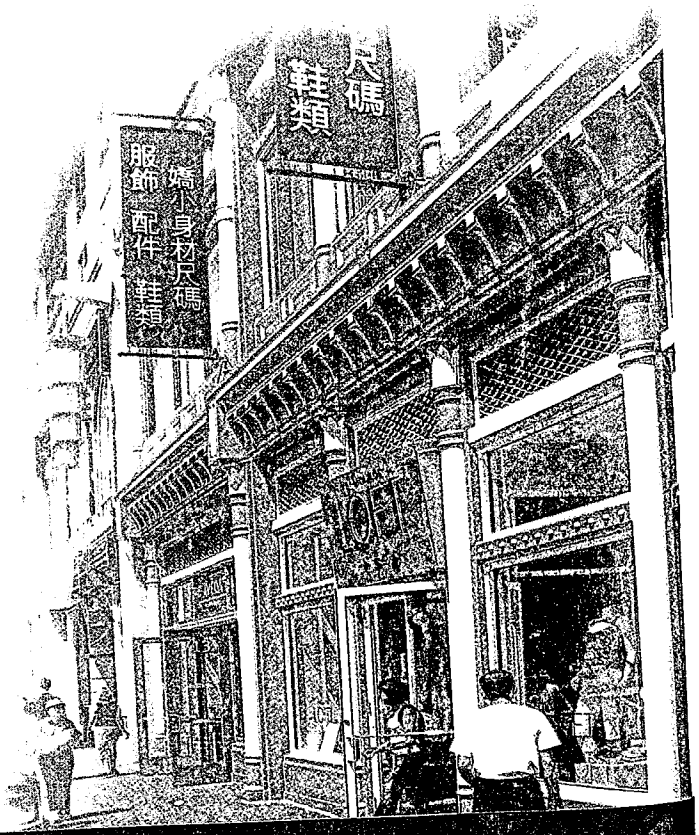
Writers in colleges and universities respond to these questions and many others. They challenge old answers and contribute new answers. Readers of college writing expect to learn something when they read—new knowledge, a fresh interpretation, another point of view that they had not considered.

At first glance the expectations of college writing seem impossible. How can you as an undergraduate student expect to contribute new knowledge? But just as there is a great deal that maps do not show, you can find many uncertainties, controversies, and unresolved problems in any field of study. You just have to ask the right questions.

Ask interesting questions

Good questions can take you to places that will interest you and your readers alike.

- Focus on an area you don't know and want to know more about.
- Find out where experts disagree. What exactly is the source of the disagreement? Why do they come to different conclusions using the same evidence?
- Analyze explanations of current trends and events. What possible causes might be left out?
- Examine proposals to solve problems. Does the solution fix the problem? Will people support the solution if it costs them effort or money?
- Compare what people claim and the reality. Often people (especially politicians) represent things and their role in making things much better than they actually are.



Local questions are often more interesting than broad, general questions. For example, should historic neighborhoods be preserved, or should they give way to urban renewal and gentrification, as has happened to Chinatown in Washington, D.C.?

Use strategies for finding a topic

Sometimes your instructor will assign a topic, but more often you will have to come up with your own topic. Look first at material from your course. You might find a topic to explore in the readings or from class discussion.

Start with what interests you. It's hard to write about topics that you care little about. If your assignment gives you a range of options, make more than one list.

PERSONAL	*1. History of Anime in Japan*
	2. Cave exploration and conservation
	3. Learning to windsurf
CAMPUS	*1. Pros and cons of computer fees*
	2. Excessive litter on campus
	3. Fellowships for study-abroad programs
COMMUNITY	*1. Safe bicycle commuting*
	2. Bilingual education programs
	3. Better public transportation
NATION/WORLD	*1. Advertising aimed at preschool children*
	2. Censorship of the Internet
	3. Genetically altered crops

WRITE NOW

Mapping your campus

Your campus likely has an information desk for students and visitors. Information centers typically will have several brochures with maps. Visit the information desk and collect everything that includes a map. Then compare the maps. Make a checklist for what the maps show and don't show (building names, streets, shuttle bus routes, bicycle routes, parking, landmarks, hotels, and more).

Create a map for new students on your campus that contains insider knowledge that would not appear on the maps your school produces. For example, where can you find the best burger on or close to campus? The best cup of coffee or cookies? A quiet place to study? A great place to meet friends?

Make a list of places that need to be included on your map. Then draw the map. Google Maps is an excellent tool for making maps of campuses and neighborhoods.

Think About Your Audience

When you talk with someone face-to-face, you receive constant feedback from that person, even when you're doing all the talking. Your listener may nod in agreement, frown, act bored, and give you a variety of other signals.

Imagine your readers

When you write, you rarely receive immediate response from readers. Most of the time you don't know exactly how readers will react to what you write. You have to think consciously about your readers and anticipate how they might respond.

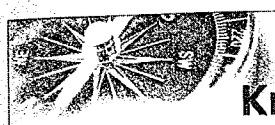
Readers of college writing

Readers of college writing expect more than what they can find out from a Google search or an online encyclopedia. Facts are easy to obtain from databases and print sources. Readers want to know how these facts are connected.

Good college writing involves an element of surprise. If readers can predict exactly where a writer is going, even if they fully agree, they will either skim to the end or stop reading. Readers expect you to tell them something that they don't already know.

Writing in college . . .	**Writers are expected to . . .**
States explicit claims	Make a claim that isn't obvious. The claim is often called a thesis statement.
Develops an argument	Support their claims with facts, evidence, reasons, and testimony from experts.
Analyzes with insight	Analyze in depth what they read and view.
Investigates complexity	Explore the complexity of a subject, challenging their readers by asking "Have you thought about this?" or "What if you discard the usual way of thinking about a subject and take the opposite point of view?"
Organizes with a hierarchical structure	Make the major parts evident to readers and indicate which parts are subordinate to others.
Signals with transitions	Indicate logical relationships clearly so readers can follow a pathway without getting lost.
Documents sources carefully	Provide the sources of information so readers can consult the same sources the writer used.

Watch the Animation on Knowing Your Audience at mycomplab.com



STAYING ON TRACK

Know what college readers expect

Readers expect to be challenged.
Simple answers that can be easily looked up are not adequate.

OFF TRACK
The United States entered World War II when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. (This fact is well known and not informative for college readers.)

ON TRACK
The war with Japan actually began on July 25, 1941, when President Franklin Roosevelt froze Japanese assets and declared an oil embargo, leaving the Japanese with the choices of abandoning the war with China or neutralizing the United States Navy in order to secure oil resources in Indonesia.

Readers expect claims to be backed up with reasons and evidence.
Simple explanations without support are not adequate.

OFF TRACK
New York City is an exciting place to live, but I wouldn't want to move there because of the crime. (Is crime really that much higher in New York City?)

ON TRACK
Many people don't know that New York City is the safest large city in the United States according to FBI crime statistics. It even ranks in the top 20 safest cities among the 210 cities with populations over 100,000.

Readers expect complex answers for complex problems.
Simple solutions for complex problems are not adequate.

OFF TRACK
We need posters urging students not to litter so much on campus. *(Are posters alone likely to solve the problem?)*

ON TRACK
Most of the litter on our campus is paper, bottles, and cans—all recyclable—yet there are almost no recycle containers on campus. Putting recycle containers in high-litter locations along with a "don't litter" campaign could go a long way toward making our campus cleaner.

Readers expect writers to be engaged.
Readers expect writers to be curious and genuinely concerned about their subjects.

OFF TRACK
Older people have to deal with too much bureaucracy to obtain health care. *(The statement rings true but doesn't motivate readers.)*

ON TRACK
After spending a day with my 78-year-old aunt sorting through stacks of booklets and forms and waiting on a help line that never answered, I became convinced that the Medicare prescription drug program is an aging American's worst nightmare.

Think About Your Credibility

Some writers begin with credibility because of who they are. If you wonder what foods compose a balanced meal for your dog, you probably would listen carefully to the advice of a veterinarian. Most writers, however, have to convince their readers to keep reading by demonstrating knowledge of their subject and concern with their readers' needs.

Think about how you want your readers to see you

To get your readers to take you seriously, you must convince them that they can trust you. You need to get them to see you as

Concerned

Readers want you to be committed to what you are writing about. They also expect you to be concerned with them as readers. After all, if you don't care about them, why should they read what you write?

Well informed

Many people ramble on about any subject without knowing anything about it. If they are family members, you have to suffer their opinions, but it is not enjoyable. College writing requires that you do your homework on a subject.

Fair

Many writers look at only one side of an issue. Readers respect objectivity and an unbiased approach.

Ethical

Many writers use only the facts that support their positions and often distort facts and sources. Critical readers often notice what is being left out. Don't try to conceal what doesn't support your position.

Considerate

Writers who don't bother to create new paragraphs when they move to new idea or fail to signal that they are making a transition to a new topic force readers to make extra effort. Readers can become annoyed in a hurry.

Aware of writing in a discipline

Different disciplines use different vocabularies, formats, and evidence to make and support claims.

Careful

No one likes to read sloppy, error-filled writing. Readers appreciate writers who take extra time to get the little things right.

Visually fluent

Digital technologies have made it easy to insert images and graphics in your writing and to publish on the Web. But these technologies don't tell you if, when, and how images and graphics should be used.

STAYING ON TRACK

Build your credibility

Know what's at stake
What you are writing about should matter to your readers.
If its importance is not evident, it's your job to explain why your readers should consider it important.

OFF TRACK
We should be concerned about two-thirds of Central and South America's 110 brightly colored harlequin frog species becoming extinct in the last twenty years. (The loss of any species is unfortunate, but the writer gives us no other reason for concern.)

ON TRACK
The rapid decline of amphibians worldwide due to global warming may be the advance warning of the loss of cold-weather species such as polar bears, penguins, and reindeer.

Have your readers in mind
If you are writing about a specialized subject that your readers don't know much about, take the time to explain key concepts.

OFF TRACK
Reduction in the value of a debt security, especially a bond, results from a rise in interest rates. Conversely, a decline in interest rates results in an increase in the value of a debt security, especially bonds. *(The basic idea is here, but it is not expressed clearly, especially if the reader is not familiar with investing.)*

ON TRACK
Bond prices move inversely to interest rates. When interest rates go up, bond prices go down, and when interest rates go down, bond prices go up.

Think about alternative solutions and points of view
Readers appreciate a writer's ability to see a subject from multiple perspectives.

OFF TRACK
We will reduce greenhouse gas and global warming only if we greatly increase wind-generated electricity. *(Wind power is an alternative energy source, but it is expensive and many people don't want windmills in scenic areas. The writer also doesn't mention using energy more efficiently.)*

ON TRACK
If the world is serious about limiting carbon emissions to reduce global warming, then along with increasing efficient energy use, all non-carbon-emitting energy sources must be considered, including nuclear power. Nuclear power now produces about 20% of U.S. electricity with no emissions—the equivalent of taking 58 million passenger cars off the road.