3 Planning
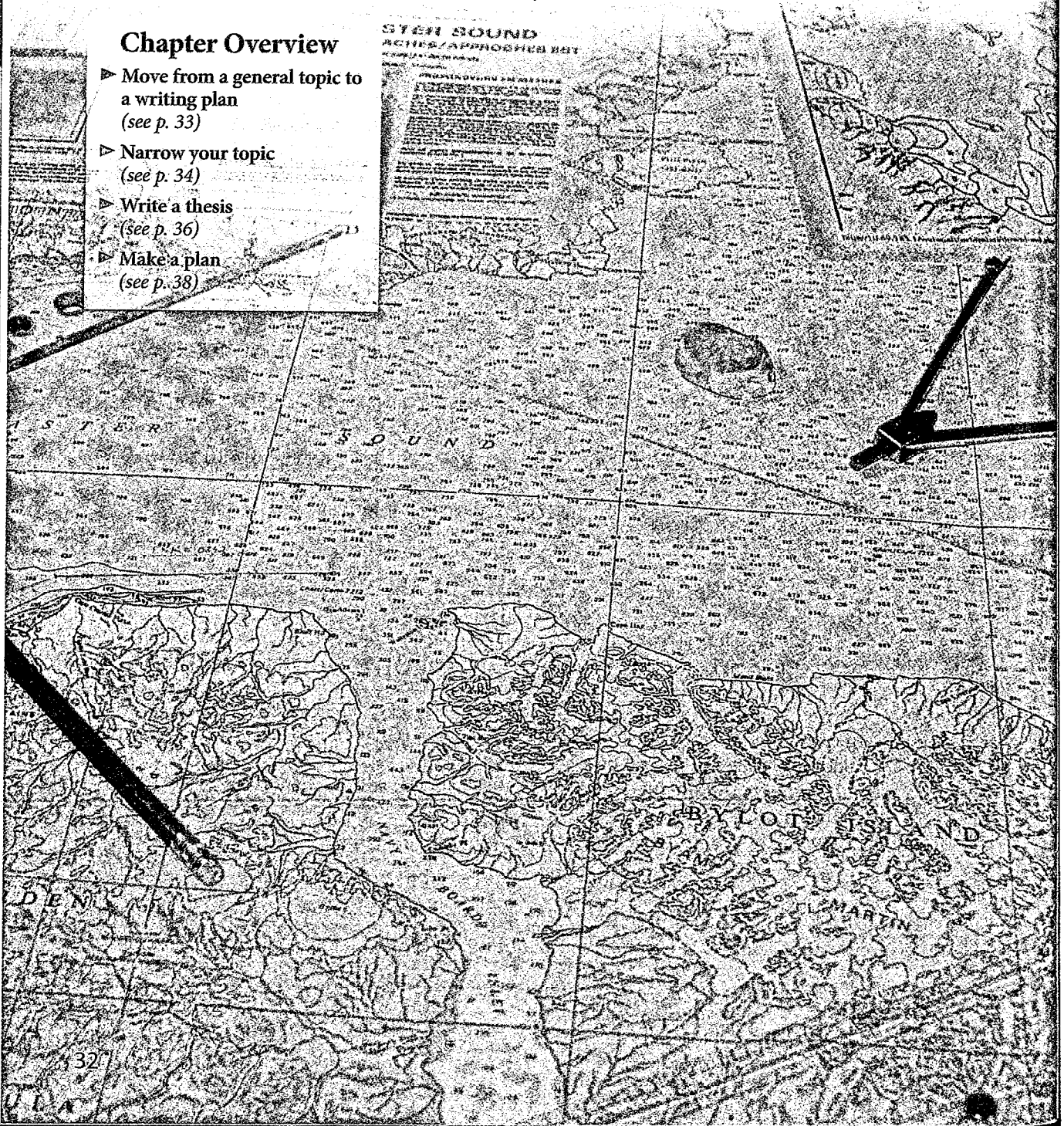
Developing a plan for writing is the key to success.

Chapter Overview

Move from a General Topic to a Writing Plan

After you have found a topic (see Chapter 1) and likely have read about the topic (see Chapter 2), you need to formulate a plan for writing. Planning in advance will make your time more productive and lead to better results.

IDENTIFY YOUR PURPOSE

Often your assignment will direct your purpose. Look for words like these.

Reflect: Think about an event or a concept in terms of your own experience.
→ **See Chapter 8**

Inform: Report information or explain a concept or idea.
→ **See Chapter 9**

Analyze: Interpret a text or event to find connections and reach conclusions.
→ **See Chapter 10**

Analyze causes: Identify probable causes of a trend, event, or phenomenon.
→ **See Chapter 11**

Evaluate: Determine whether something is good or bad according to criteria that you identify.
→ **See Chapter 12**

Argue: Take a position on an issue or propose a course of action.
→ **See Chapters 13 and 14**

NARROW YOUR TOPIC

If your topic is too broad, you will find too much information and will not be able to cover the topic adequately.
→ **See page 34**

WRITE A WORKING THESIS

Avoid sentences that begin "I'm going to write about computer games and children," or "My topic is computer games and children." Write a complete sentence that states your main idea and makes an assertion about that main idea. (For example, "Computer games are valuable because they improve children's visual attention skills and literacy skills.")
→ **See page 36**

EVALUATE YOUR THESIS

Your working thesis should progress to a statement that is of increasing interest to your readers.
→ **See page 37**

MAKE A VISUAL PLAN OR A WORKING OUTLINE

A visual plan or a working outline will list the major sections and sketch the overall development.
→ **See page 38**

Narrow Your Topic

Until you can focus a broad topic, you will not be able to organize your project and treat your subject in enough depth.

Take, for example, the broad topic of whether genetically modified foods (GM foods) are safe for consumers. The topic is much too large to cover adequately in a course project. Ask questions and brainstorm (see page 12).

- Who is involved in the issue? Governments? corporations? farmers? consumers?
- Which crops are genetically modified?
- What time period is involved?
- What countries are involved?
- Why are GM foods controversial?

You may need to do research to find out more about your topic in order to narrow it (see Chapter 16). Your readers will stay better focused if you have a specific topic, and you will be better equipped to cover your topic thoroughly.

Broad topic
Are GM foods safe for consumers?

Narrower topic
What is the European Union's policy on selling and labeling GM foods?

Specific topic
Why did France and other European countries ban Monsanto's MON0810 corn and similar genetically modified crops in 2007?

Map your topic

Mapping is another method of narrowing your topic. Mapping can also help you to create a working outline if you connect the ideas you set out. See the facing page for how Patrice Conley used mapping to narrow her topic.

To create a map you can use either pen and paper or mapping software available on the Internet. Google Docs has a free drawing program that can make diagrams.

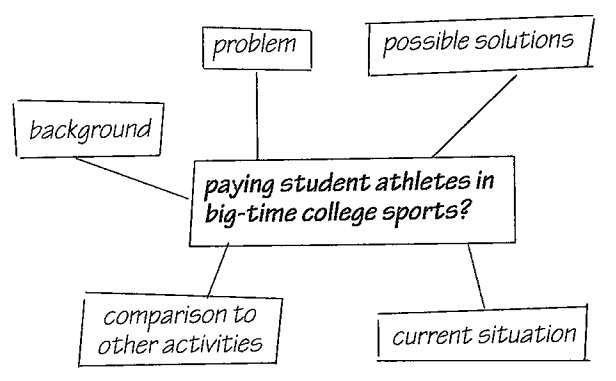Watch the Video on Narrowing a Subject at mycomplab.com

Writer at work

Patrice Conley decided to make a map in order to find a center for her broad topic of whether student athletes in big-time college sports should be paid.

She started with her general topic, stating it in a few words and drawing a box around it.
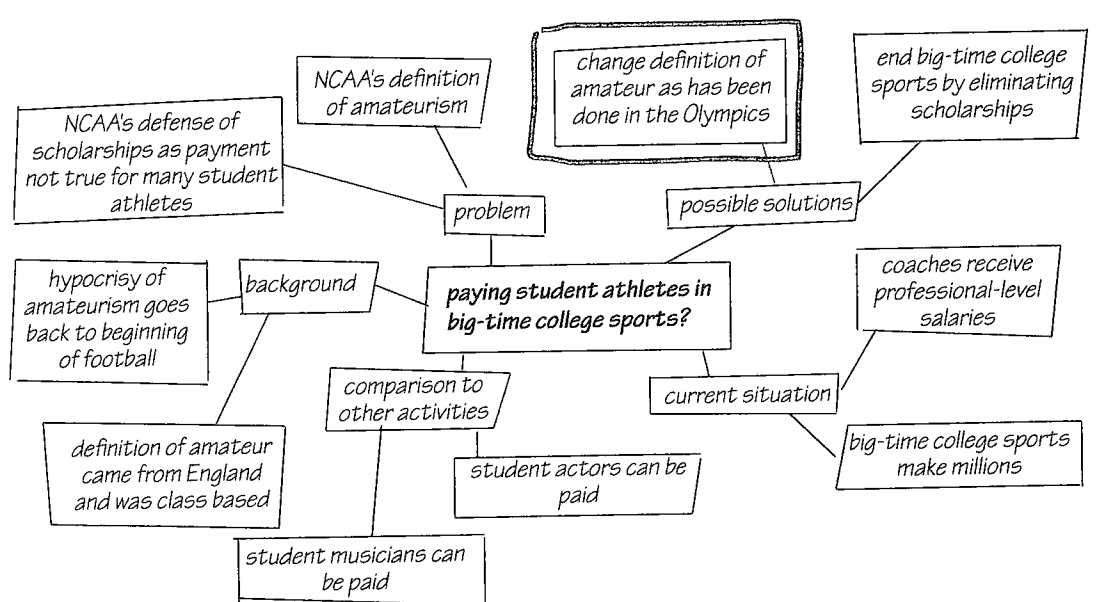
Next Patrice asked additional questions:
- What is the current situation?
- Who is involved?
- How long has it been going on?
- What else is like it?
- What exactly is the problem?
- What possible solutions are there for the problem?

She thought of some general categories for her topic in response to those questions and drew boxes for each.

```
problem          possible solutions

background
                 paying student athletes in
                 big-time college sports?

comparison to
other activities          current situation
```

She then looked at her notes from what she had read. She began to generate ideas for each of the subcategories and put them on her map.

When she finished she took stock of her map. She picked up a marker and drew a box around a possible central idea for her project.

```
                    NCAA's definition    change definition of     end big-time college
                    of amateurism        amateur as has been      sports by eliminating
NCAA's defense of                        done in the Olympics     scholarships
scholarships as payment
not true for many student
athletes
                              problem              possible solutions
hypocrisy of        background                                    coaches receive
amateurism goes                 paying student athletes in        professional-level
back to beginning               big-time college sports?          salaries
of football
                    comparison to            current situation
definition of amateur  other activities                          big-time college sports
came from England                                                make millions
and was class based          student actors can be
                             paid
        student musicians can
        be paid
```

She succeeded in narrowing her general topic to the more specific topic of changing the definition of amateur as it applies to student athletes.

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Write a Thesis

The thesis announces your topic and states what point or points you want to make about that topic. A thesis is a statement, not a question. A thesis has a subject and an assertion.

Subject ↓   **Assertion** ↓

Advertisers use Facebook's list of friends to determine where you live and what you buy in order to send you targeted ads.

Write a working thesis

Your working thesis should follow the direction your assignment calls for. These examples show how the broad subject of databases and privacy can be approached from different directions, depending on your purpose.

Describe
WORKING THESIS: My Amazon.com account has a list of every book I have purchased from them dating back ten years, plus Amazon records every item I browse but don't buy. No wonder Amazon's recommendations of what I might like are so uncannily accurate!

Analyze
WORKING THESIS: Understanding how the concept of privacy is legally defined is critical for strengthening privacy laws.

Inform
WORKING THESIS: Imagine a government that compels its citizens to reveal vast amounts of personal data, including your physical description, your phone number, your political party, your parents' and spouse's names, where you work, where you live, what property you own, and every legal transaction in your life, and then making that data available to anyone on the Web—which is exactly what federal, state, and local governments are doing today in the United States.

Argue
WORKING THESIS: Unlike the government, companies have almost no restrictions on what information they collect or what they do with it. Laws should be passed that make companies responsible for the misuse of personal information and allow people to have greater participation in how that information is used.

Evaluate
WORKING THESIS: Using personal consumer data to refuse service or offer inferior service to customers who likely will not spend much money is an example of the misuse of personal information.

Reflect
WORKING THESIS: I had never thought about the consequences of data profiling until I read about Netflix's policy of "throttling" frequent users, which explained why deliveries of movies I had requested from Netflix grew slower and slower.

Analyze causes
WORKING THESIS: Many laws to protect privacy are on the books, but these laws are ineffective for the digital era because they were written to protect people from government spying and intrusion rather than from the collection and selling of personal information by companies.

👁 Watch the Animation on Writing Thesis Statements at mycomplab.com

Evaluate your working thesis

Ask yourself these questions about your working thesis.
1. Is it specific?
2. Is it manageable in terms of the assigned length and the amount of time you have?
3. Is it interesting to your intended readers?

Example 1
WORKING THESIS: Steroids are a problem in Major League Baseball.

- Specific? The thesis is too broad. What exactly is the problem? Is the problem the same now as it was a few years ago?

- Manageable? Because the thesis is not limited, it cannot be discussed adequately.

- Interesting? The topic is potentially interesting, but many people are aware that baseball players used steroids. How can you lead readers to think about the topic in a new way?

Example 1 revised
THESIS: Home run records from 1993 through 2004 should be placed in a special category because of the high use of steroids in Major League Baseball before testing began in 2004.

Example 2
WORKING THESIS: "Nanotechnology" refers to any technology that deals with particles measured in units of a nanometer, which is one billionth (10^{-9}) of a meter.

- **Specific?** The thesis is specific, but it is too narrow. It offers only a definition of nanotechnology.

- **Manageable?** The thesis states a fact.

- **Interesting?** Nanotechnology could be interesting if some of its potential effects are included.

Example 2 revised
THESIS: Nanotechnology may soon change concepts of social identity by making it possible for individuals to alter their physical appearances either through cosmetic surgery performed by nanorobots or changes in genetic sequences on chromosomes.
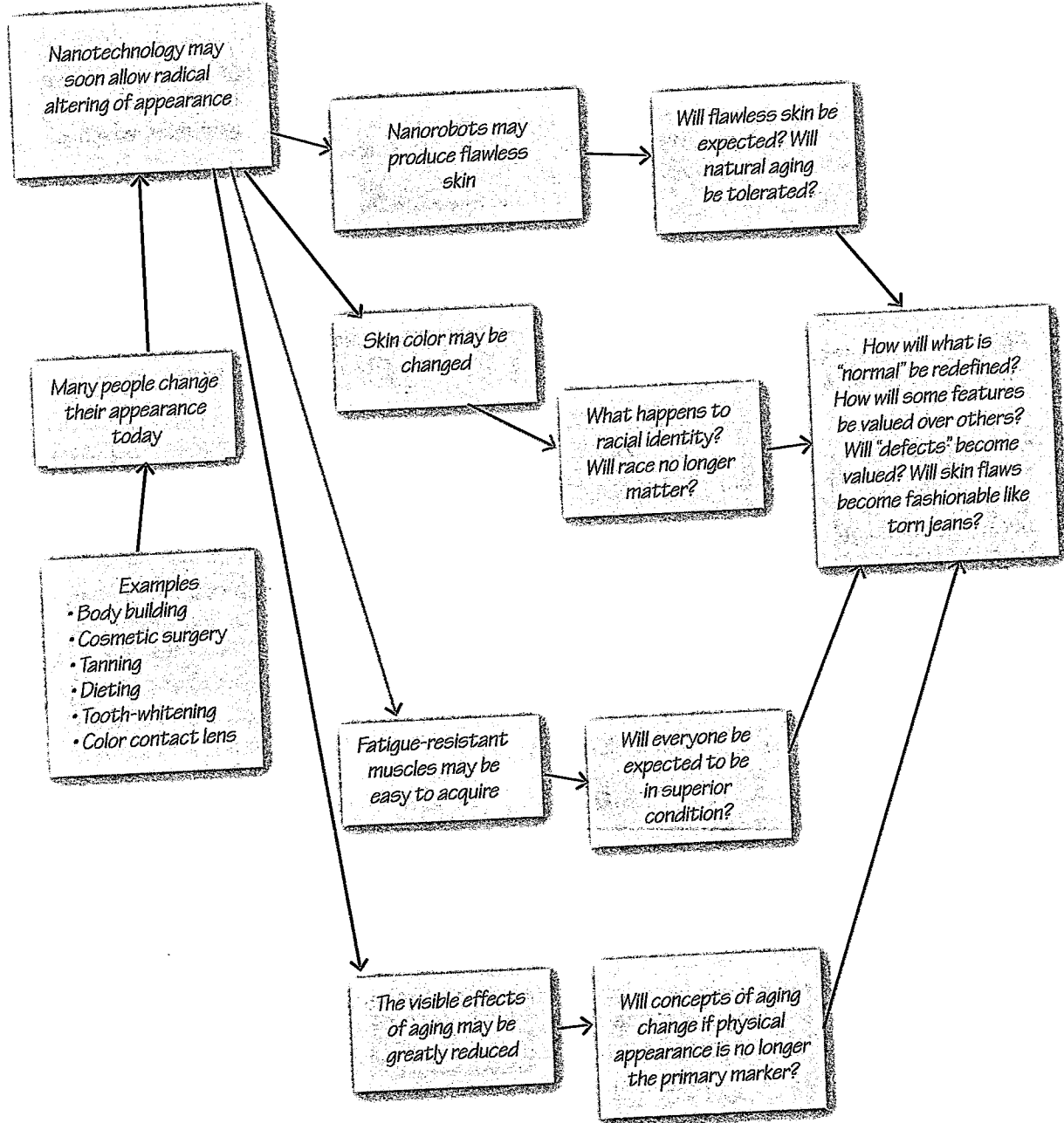

WRITE NOW
Write a bold thesis

Too much of what we read says what we've all heard before. Instead of serving up what readers likely know, try challenging readers. For example, in *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, Steven Johnson argues that video games are not a total waste of time but teach children valuable problem-solving skills.

Think of something that many people accept as common sense or general wisdom—that junk food is bad for you, reality television is garbage, or graffiti is vandalism—and argue the opposite. Or that something thought of as boring might be really interesting: bird watching, classical Indian music, or ancient Greek drama. Write a thesis that stands common wisdom on its head.

Then write a paragraph about how you might argue for your controversial thesis. What evidence might you supply?

Make a Plan

Get out your notes and all the information you have collected. You may find it helpful to write major points on sticky notes so you can move them around. If your topic is the effects of nanotechnology on the body, you might produce an organization plan similar to this one.

```
Nanotechnology may          Nanorobots may           Will flawless skin be
soon allow radical    →     produce flawless    →    expected? Will
altering of appearance      skin                     natural aging
                                                     be tolerated?

Many people change          Skin color may be        How will what is
their appearance            changed                  "normal" be redefined?
today                                                How will some features
                                    What happens to  be valued over others?
Examples                            racial identity? Will "defects" become
• Body building                →    Will race no     valued? Will skin flaws
• Cosmetic surgery                  longer           become fashionable like
• Tanning                           matter?          torn jeans?
• Dieting
• Tooth-whitening
• Color contact lens

              Fatigue-resistant     Will everyone be
              muscles may be    →   expected to be
              easy to acquire       in superior
                                    condition?

              The visible effects   Will concepts of aging
              of aging may be   →   change if physical
              greatly reduced       appearance is no longer
                                    the primary marker?
```

Listen to the Podcast on Organizing at mycomplab.com

Writing plans often take the form of outlines, either formal outlines or working outlines.

A **formal outline** typically begins with the working thesis, which anchors the entire outline.

A **working outline** is a sketch of how you will arrange the major sections.

WORKING THESIS: Nanotechnology may soon allow radical altering of the human body, which will have major social consequences.

I. Altering the appearance of the body has become common.

    A. Cosmetic surgery is now routine.

    B. Body building is popular.

    C. Most people are aware of diet and many attempt to control their weight.

    D. Tanning, changing eye color, and tooth-whitening are frequent.

II. Nanotechnology may soon radically accelerate these trends.

    A. Nanorobots may produce flawless skin.

    B. Skin color may be changed.

    C. Wrinkles and other signs of aging may be eliminated or reduced.

    D. Muscle tissue may be enhanced.

Effects of nanotechnology on the body

SECTION 1: Begin with how people change the appearance of their bodies today.

SECTION 2: Discuss how nanotechnology will accelerate these trends, giving people the potential for perfect skin, changing their skin color, and reducing aging.

SECTION 3: Move to the questions these technologies raise, such as how aging will be perceived and how race will be understood.

SECTION 4: Raise the issue of how "normal" will be defined if people can choose how they look.

SECTION 5: Expand the idea of "normal" to who will control what is desirable and how social hierarchies might be changed or reinforced.

SECTION 6: End by connecting body issues to larger issues such as who gets to live for how long.

WRITE NOW

Compare planning methods

First, write a working thesis. Ask the questions on page 37.

- Is the thesis specific?   • Is it manageable?   • Is it interesting?

Revise your thesis if necessary.

Then use two of the three methods—a visual organization plan, a formal outline, or a working outline—to develop a plan for writing a paper based on the thesis. When you finish, compare the plans. Which will be easier to use for writing your paper?