Writing is not a matter of recording already developed thoughts but a process of figuring out what you think. Since it’s not possible to think about everything all at once, most experienced writers handle a piece of writing in stages. You will generally move from planning to drafting to revising, but be prepared to return to earlier stages as your ideas develop.

1 Explore and plan; then rough out a first draft.

Before attempting a first draft, spend some time generating ideas. Mull over your subject while listening to music or driving to work, jot down inspirations, and explore your insights with a willing listener. Ask yourself questions: What do you find puzzling, striking, or interesting about your subject? What would you like to know more about? At this stage, you should be collecting information and experimenting with ways of focusing and organizing it to reach your readers.

1a Assess the writing situation.

Begin by taking a look at your writing situation. The key elements of a writing situation include the following:

- your subject
- the sources of information available to you
- your purpose
- your audience
- any constraints (length, document design, deadlines)

It is likely that you will make final decisions about all of these matters later in the writing process—after a first draft, for example. Nevertheless, you can save yourself time by thinking about as many of them as possible in advance. For a quick checklist, see the chart on page 3.
What counts as good writing varies from culture to culture and even among groups within cultures. In some situations, you will need to become familiar with the writing styles—such as direct or indirect, personal or impersonal, plain or embellished—that are valued by the culture or discipline for which you are writing.

### Checklist for assessing the writing situation

**Subject**

- Has the subject (or a range of possible subjects) been given to you, or are you free to choose your own?
- What interests you about your subject? What questions would you like to explore?
- Why is your subject worth writing about? How might readers benefit from reading about it?
- Do you need to narrow your subject to a more specific topic (because of length restrictions, for instance)?

**Sources of information**

- Where will your information come from: Reading? Personal experience? Observation? Interviews? Questionnaires?
- What documentation style is required: MLA? APA? Chicago?

**Purpose and audience**

- Why are you writing: To inform readers? To persuade them? To entertain them? To call them to action? Some combination of these?
- Who are your readers? How well informed are they about the subject? What do you want them to learn?
- How interested and attentive are they likely to be? Will they resist any of your ideas?
- What is your relationship to your readers: Student to instructor? Employee to supervisor? Citizen to citizen? Expert to novice?
Checklist for assessing the writing situation, \textit{continued}

Length and document design

- Do you have any length specifications? If not, what length seems appropriate, given your subject, purpose, and audience?
- Is a particular document format required? If so, do you have guidelines to follow or examples to consult?

Reviewers and deadlines

- Who will be reviewing your draft in progress: Your instructor? A writing center tutor? Your classmates? A family member?
- What are your deadlines? How much time will you need to allow for the various stages of writing, including proofreading and printing the final draft?

\textbf{Subject}

Frequently your subject will be given to you. In a psychology class, for example, you might be asked to explain Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis of fairy tales. In a composition course, assignments often ask you to respond to readings. In the business world, your assignment might be to draft a quarterly sales report.

When you are free to choose your own subject, it’s a good idea to focus on something you are genuinely curious about. If you are studying television, radio, and the Internet in a communication course, for example, you might ask yourself which of these subjects interests you most. Perhaps you want to learn more about the role streaming video can play in activism and social change. Look through your readings and class notes to see if you can identify questions you’d like to explore further in an essay.

Make sure that you can reasonably investigate your subject in the space you have. If you are limited to a few pages, for
Ways to narrow a subject to a topic

Subdividing your subject

One way to subdivide a subject is to ask questions sparked by reading or talking to your classmates. If you are writing about teen pregnancy, for example, you might wonder why your city and a neighboring city have different rates of teen pregnancy. This question would give you a manageable topic for a short paper.

Restricting your purpose

Often you can restrict your purpose. For example, if your subject is preventing teen pregnancy, you might at first hope to call readers to action. Upon further reflection, you might realize that this goal is more than you could hope to accomplish, given your word limit. By adopting a more limited purpose—to show that an experimental health curriculum for sixth graders results in lower rates of teen pregnancy—you would have a manageable topic.

Restricting your audience

Consider writing for a particular audience. For example, instead of writing for a general audience on a broad subject such as teen pregnancy, you might address a group with a special interest in the subject: teens, parents, educators, or politicians.

Considering the information available to you

Look at the information you have collected. If you have gathered a great deal of information on one aspect of your subject (for example, counseling programs for pregnant teens) and less information on other aspects (such as birth control education), you may have found your topic.

example, you could not do justice to a subject as broad as “videos as agents of social change.” You could, however, focus on one aspect of the subject—perhaps experts’ contradictory claims about the effectiveness of “narrowcasting,” or creating video content for small, specific audiences. The chart on this page
suggests ways to narrow a subject to a manageable topic for a paper.

Whether or not you choose your own subject, it’s important to be aware of the expectations of each writing situation. The chart on page 9 suggests ways to interpret assignments.

**Sources of information**

Where will your facts, details, and examples come from? Can you develop your topic from personal experience alone, or will you need to search for relevant information through reading, observation, interviews, or questionnaires?

**Reading**  
Reading is an important way to deepen your understanding of a topic and expand your perspective. Reading will be your primary source of information for many college assignments, which will generally be of two kinds: (1) analytical essays that call for a close reading of one book, essay, literary work, or visual and (2) research assignments that ask you to find and consult a variety of sources on a topic.

For an analytical essay, you will select details from the work, not to inform readers but to support an interpretation. You can often assume that your readers are familiar with the work and have a copy of it on hand, but be sure to provide enough context so that someone who doesn’t know the work well can still follow your interpretation. When you quote from the work, page references are usually sufficient. When in doubt about the need for documentation, consult your instructor.

For a research paper, you cannot assume that your readers are familiar with your sources. Therefore, you must formally document all quoted, summarized, or paraphrased material.

**Personal experience**  
If your interest in a subject stems from your personal experience, you will want to ask what it is about
your experience that would interest your audience and why. For example, if you volunteered at a homeless shelter, you might have spent some time talking to homeless children and learned about their needs. Perhaps you can use your experience to broaden your readers’ understanding of the issues, to persuade an organization to fund an after-school program for homeless children, or to propose changes in legislation.

Observation  Observation is an excellent means of collecting information about a wide range of subjects, such as gender relationships on a popular television program, the clichéd language of sports announcers, or the appeal of a local art museum. For such subjects, do not rely on your memory alone; your information will be fresher and more detailed if you actively collect it, with a notebook, laptop, or tape recorder in hand.

Interviews and questionnaires Interviews and questionnaires can supply detailed and interesting information on many subjects. A nursing student interested in the care of terminally ill patients might interview hospice nurses; a political science major might speak with a local judge about alternative sentencing for first offenders; a future teacher might conduct a survey on the use of computers in local elementary schools.

It is a good idea to record interviews to preserve any lively quotations that you might want to weave into your essay. Circulating questionnaires by e-mail or on a Web site will facilitate responses. Keep questions simple and specify a deadline to ensure that you get a reasonable number of replies. (See also 46g.)

Purpose

Your purpose will often be dictated by your writing situation. Perhaps you have been asked to draft a proposal requesting funding for a student organization, to report the results of a psychology experiment, or to write about the controversy surrounding genetically modified (GM) foods for the
school newspaper. Even though your overall purpose is fairly obvious in such situations, a closer look at the assignment can help you make a variety of necessary decisions. How detailed should the proposal be? How technical does your psychology professor expect your report to be? Do you want to inform students about the GM food controversy or change their attitudes toward it?

In many writing situations, part of your challenge will be discovering a purpose. Asking yourself why readers should care about what you are saying can help you decide what your purpose might be. Perhaps your subject is magnet schools—schools that draw students from different neighborhoods because of features such as advanced science classes or a concentration on the arts. If you have discussed magnet schools in class, a description of how these schools work probably will not interest you or your readers. But maybe you have discovered that your county’s magnet schools are not promoting diversity as had been planned and you want to call your readers to action. Or maybe you are interested in comparing student performance at magnet schools and traditional schools.

Although no precise guidelines will lead you to a purpose, you can begin by asking yourself which one or more of the following aims you hope to accomplish.

**PURPOSES FOR WRITING**

- to inform
- to persuade
- to entertain
- to call readers to action
- to change attitudes
- to analyze
- to argue
- to evaluate
- to recommend
- to request
- to propose
- to provoke thought
- to express feelings
- to summarize

Writers often misjudge their own purposes, summarizing when they should be analyzing, or expressing feelings about problems instead of proposing solutions. Before beginning any writing task, pause to ask, “Why am I communicating with my readers?” This question will lead you to another important question: “Just who are my readers?”
Understanding an assignment

Determining the purpose of an assignment

Usually the wording of an assignment will suggest its purpose. You might be expected to do one or more of the following in a college writing assignment:

- summarize information from textbooks, lectures, or research (See 4c.)
- analyze ideas and concepts (See 4d.)
- take a position on a topic and defend it with evidence (See 5.)
- synthesize (combine ideas from) several sources and create an original argument (See 52c and 56c.)

Understanding how to answer an assignment’s question

Many assignments will ask you to answer a how or why question. Such questions cannot be answered using only facts; instead, you will need to take a position. For example, the question “What are the survival rates for leukemia patients?” can be answered by reporting facts. The question “Why are the survival rates for leukemia patients in one state lower than those in a neighboring state?” must be answered with both facts and interpretation. If a list of prompts appears in the assignment, be careful—instructors rarely expect you to answer all the questions in order. Look instead for topics, themes, or ideas that will help you ask your own questions.

Recognizing implied questions

When you are asked to discuss, analyze, agree or disagree with, or consider a topic, your instructor will often expect you to answer a how or why question.

Discuss the effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on special education programs. = How has the No Child Left Behind Act affected special education programs?

Consider the recent rise of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnoses. = Why are diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder rising?
**Audience**

Audience analysis can often lead you to an effective strategy for reaching your readers. A writer whose purpose was to persuade teenagers not to smoke began by making some observations about her audience (see the bottom of this page).

This analysis led the writer to focus on the social aspects of smoking rather than on the health risks. Her audience analysis also warned her against adopting a preachy tone that her readers might find offensive. Instead of lecturing, she decided to draw examples from her own experience as a smoker: burning holes in her best sweater, driving in zero-degree weather late at night to buy cigarettes, and so on. The result was an essay that reached its readers instead of alienating them.

Of course, in some writing situations the audience will not be neatly defined for you. Nevertheless, many of the choices you make as you write will tell readers who you think they are (novices or experts, for example), so it is best to be consistent.

For help with audience analysis, see the chart on page 3.

**AUDIENCE ANALYSIS**

- audience: teenagers
- dislike lectures, especially from older people
- have little sense of their own mortality
- are concerned about physical appearance
- want to be socially accepted
- have limited budgets
Academic audiences  In the academic world, considerations of audience can be more complex than they seem at first. Your instructor will read your essay, of course, but most instructors play multiple roles while reading. Their first and most obvious roles are as coach and judge; less obvious is their role as an intelligent and objective reader, the kind of person who might reasonably be informed, convinced, entertained, or called to action by what you have to say.

Some instructors specify an audience, such as a hypothetical supervisor, readers of a local newspaper, or peers in a particular field. Other instructors expect you to imagine an audience appropriate to your purpose and your subject. Still others prefer that you write for a general audience of educated readers—nonspecialists who can be expected to read with an intelligent, critical eye.

Business audiences  Writers in the business world often find themselves writing for multiple audiences. A letter to a client, for instance, might be distributed to sales representatives as well. Readers of a report might include persons with and without technical expertise or readers who want details and those who prefer a quick overview.

To satisfy the demands of multiple audiences, business writers have developed a variety of strategies: attaching cover letters to detailed reports, adding boldface headings, placing summaries in the margin, and so on.

Public audiences  Writers in communities often write for a specific audience—the local school superintendent, a legislative representative, fellow members of a social group, readers of a local paper. With public writing, it is more likely that you are familiar with the views your readers hold and the assumptions they make, so you may be better able to judge how to engage those readers. If you are writing to a group of other parents to share ideas for lowering school bus transportation costs, for instance, you may have a good sense of whether to lead with a logical analysis of other school-related fees or with a fiery criticism of key decision makers.
**Length and document design**

Writers seldom have complete control over length. Journalists usually write within strict word limits set by their editors, businesspeople routinely aim for conciseness, and most college assignments specify an approximate length.

Your writing situation may also require certain document designs. Specific formats are used in business for letters, memos, and reports. In the academic world, you may need to learn precise conventions for lab reports, critiques, research papers, and so on. For most undergraduate essays, a standard format is acceptable (see 59).

In some writing situations, you will be free to create your own design, complete with headings, displayed lists, and perhaps visuals such as charts and graphs. For a discussion of the principles of document design, see 58.

**Reviewers and deadlines**

Professional and business writers rarely work alone. They work with reviewers, often called editors, who offer advice throughout the writing process. In college classes, too, the use of reviewers is common. Some instructors play the role of reviewer for you; others may ask you to visit your college’s writing center. Still others schedule peer review sessions in class or online. Such sessions give you a chance to hear what other students think about your draft in progress—and to play the role of reviewer yourself.

Deadlines are a key element of any writing situation. They help you plan your time and map out what you can accomplish in that time. For complex writing projects, such as research papers, you’ll need to plan your time carefully. By working backward from the final deadline, you can create a schedule of target dates for completing parts of the process. (See p. 439 for an example.)

**Making the most of your handbook**

Peer review can benefit student writers at any stage of the writing process.

- Guidelines for peer review: page 38
EXERCISE 1–1  Narrow five of the following subjects into topics that would be manageable for an essay of two to five pages.

1. Domestic violence and the courts
2. Performing as a musician
3. Treatments for mental illness
4. An experience with racism or sexism
5. Cell phones in the classroom
6. Images of women in video games
7. Mandatory drug testing in the workplace
8. Olympic swimmers
9. Presidential campaign funding
10. The films of the Coen brothers

EXERCISE 1–2  Suggest a purpose and an audience for five of the following subjects.

1. Graphic novels as literature
2. Genetic modification of cash crop foods
3. Government housing for military veterans
4. The future of online advertising
5. Working with special needs children
6. The challenges facing single parents
7. Obesity prevention and treatment
8. Growing up in a large family
9. The influence of African art on Picasso
10. Hybrid cars

hackerhandbooks.com/bedhandbook > Writing exercises > E-ex 1–4

1b Experiment with ways to explore your subject.

Instead of just plunging into a first draft, experiment with one or more techniques for exploring your subject, perhaps one of these:

- talking and listening
- annotating texts and taking notes
- listing
- clustering
- freewriting
• asking questions
• keeping a journal
• blogging (keeping a Weblog)

Whatever technique you turn to, the goal is the same: to generate ideas that will lead you to a question, a problem, or an issue that you want to explore further. At this early stage of the writing process, don’t censor yourself. Sometimes an idea that initially seems trivial or far-fetched will actually turn out to be worthwhile.

Talking and listening

Because writing is a process of figuring out what you think about a subject, it can be useful to try out your ideas on other people. Conversation can deepen and refine your ideas before you even begin to set them down on paper. By talking and listening to others, you can also discover what they find interesting, what they are curious about, and where they disagree with you. If you are planning to advance an argument, you can try it out on listeners with other points of view.

Many writers begin a writing project by brainstorming ideas in a group, debating a point with friends, or chatting with an instructor. Others turn to themselves for company—by talking into a tape recorder. Some writers exchange ideas by sending e-mail or instant messages or by posting to discussion boards or blogs. You may be encouraged to share ideas with your classmates and instructor in an online workshop. One advantage of engaging in such discussions is that while you are “talking” you are actually writing.

Annotating texts and taking notes

When you write about a text, either a written work or a visual, one of the best ways to explore ideas is to mark up the work—on the pages of a print work (if you own a copy) or on a photocopy or printout. Annotating a text encourages you to look at it more carefully—to underline key concepts, to note
contradictions in an argument, to raise questions for investigation. Here, for example, is a paragraph from an essay on medical ethics as one student annotated it.

Breakthroughs in genetics present us with a promise and a predicament. The promise is that we may soon be able to treat and prevent a host of debilitating diseases. The predicament is that our newfound genetic knowledge may also enable us to manipulate our own nature—to enhance our muscles, memories, and moods; to choose the sex, height, and other genetic traits of our children; to make ourselves “better than well.” When science moves faster than moral understanding, as it does today, men and women struggle to articulate their unease. In liberal societies they reach first for the language of autonomy, fairness, and individual rights. But this part of our moral vocabulary is ill equipped to address the hardest questions posed by genetic engineering. The genomic revolution has induced a kind of moral vertigo.

—Michael Sandel, “The Case against Perfection”

After reading and annotating Michael Sandel’s entire article, the student looked through his annotations for patterns. He noticed that several of his annotations pointed to the larger question of whether a scientific breakthrough should be viewed in terms of its moral consequences. He decided to reread the article, taking detailed notes with this question in mind.

**Listing**

Listing ideas—a technique sometimes known as brainstorming—is a good way to figure out what you know and what questions you have. Here is a list one student writer jotted down for an essay about funding for college athletics:
• Football receives the most funding of any sport.
• Funding comes from ticket sales, fundraisers, alumni contributions.
• Biggest women’s sport is soccer.
• Women’s soccer team is only ten years old; football team is fifty years old.
• Soccer games don’t draw as many fans.
• Should funding be equal for all teams?
• Do alumni have the right to fund whatever they want?

The ideas and questions appear here in the order in which they first occurred to the writer. Later she rearranged them, grouped them under general categories, deleted some, and added others. These initial thoughts led the writer to questions that helped her narrow her topic. In other words, she treated her early list as a source of ideas and a springboard to new ideas, not as an outline.

**Clustering**

Unlike listing, clustering highlights relationships among ideas. To cluster ideas, write your topic in the center of a sheet of paper, draw a circle around it, and surround the circle with related ideas connected to it with lines. If some of the satellite ideas lead to more specific clusters, write them down as well. The writer of the diagram on page 17 was exploring ideas for an essay on obesity in children.

**Freewriting**

In its purest form, freewriting is simply nonstop writing. You set aside ten minutes or so and write whatever comes to mind, without pausing to think about word choice, spelling, or even meaning. If you get stuck, you can write about being stuck, but you should keep your fingers moving. If nothing much happens, you have lost only ten minutes. It’s more likely, though, that something interesting will emerge—perhaps an eloquent sentence, an honest expression of feeling, or an idea worth further investigation. Freewriting also lets you
When gathering material for a story, journalists routinely ask themselves Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? In addition to helping journalists get started, these questions ensure that they will not overlook an important fact.

Whenever you are writing about events, whether current or historical, asking questions is one way to get started. One student, whose topic was the negative reaction in 1915 to
D. W. Griffith’s silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, began exploring her topic with this set of questions:

- *Who* objected to the film?
- *What* were the objections?
- *When* were protests first voiced?
- *Where* were protests most strongly expressed?
- *Why* did protesters object to the film?
- *How* did protesters make their views known?

As often happens, the answers to these questions led to another question the writer wanted to explore. After she discovered that protesters objected to the film’s racist portrayal of African Americans, she wondered whether their protests had changed attitudes. This question prompted an interesting topic for a paper: Did the film’s stereotypes lead to positive, if unintended, consequences?

In the academic world, scholars often generate ideas by posing questions related to a specific discipline: one set of questions for analyzing literature, another for evaluating experiments in social psychology, still another for reporting field experiences in criminal justice. If you are writing in a particular discipline, try to find out which questions its scholars typically explore.

### Keeping a journal

A journal is a collection of informal, exploratory, sometimes experimental writing. In a journal, often meant for your eyes only, you can take risks. In one entry, for example, you might freewrite. In another, you might pose questions, whether or not you have the answers. You might comment on an interesting idea from one of your classes or keep a list of questions that occur to you while reading. You might imagine a conversation between yourself and your readers or stage a debate to understand positions counter to your own. A journal is also an excellent place to play around with language for the sheer fun of it.
Keeping a journal can be an enriching experience in its own right, since it allows you to explore issues without worrying about what someone else thinks. A journal can also serve as a sourcebook of ideas to draw on in future essays.

**Blogging (keeping a Weblog)**

Although a blog (Weblog) is a type of journal, it is a public writing space rather than a private one. In a blog, you can express opinions, release frustrations, make observations, recap an event, have fun with language, or do some combination of these. You can work through an idea for a paper by blogging about it in different ways or from different angles. One post might be your frustrated comments about the lack of parking for commuter students at your school. Maybe the next post shares a compelling statistic about competition for parking spaces at campuses nationwide. You can continue thinking about the topic as you respond to comments from other readers about alternatives to driving to campus.

1c **Draft a working thesis.**

As you explore your topic and identify questions to investigate, you will begin to see possible ways to focus your material. At this point, try to settle on a tentative central idea. The more complex your topic, the more your focus will change as your drafts evolve. For many types of writing, you will be able to assert your central idea in a sentence or two. Such a statement, which ordinarily appears in the opening paragraph of your finished essay, is called a *thesis statement*.

A thesis is often one or more of the following:

- the answer to a question you have posed
- the resolution of a problem you have identified
- a statement that takes a position on a debatable topic

A tentative, or working, thesis will help you organize your draft. Don’t worry about the exact wording because your main point may change as you refine your efforts. Here, for
example, are one student’s efforts to pose a question and draft a thesis statement for an essay in his film course.

**QUESTION**
In *Rebel without a Cause*, how does the filmmaker show that Jim Stark becomes alienated from his family and friends?

**WORKING THESIS**
In *Rebel without a Cause*, Jim Stark, the main character, is often seen literally on the edge of physical danger—walking too close to a swimming pool, leaning over an observation deck, and driving his car toward a cliff.

The working thesis offers a useful place to start writing, but it doesn’t give readers a reason to continue reading. The sentence includes an observation but no indication of why that observation matters. The student’s final thesis is more engaging, reflects an evolution of his ideas, and is a better response to his question.

**FINAL THESIS**
The scenes in which Jim Stark is on the edge of physical danger—walking too close to a swimming pool, leaning over an observation deck, and driving his car toward a cliff—suggest that he is becoming more and more agitated by the constraints of family and society.

Here, another student identifies and responds to a problem in a thesis statement for an argument paper in her composition course.

**PROBLEM**
Americans who earn average incomes cannot run effective national political campaigns.

**WORKING THESIS**
Congress should pass legislation that would make it possible for Americans who are not wealthy to be viable candidates in national political campaigns.

The student has roughed out an idea for how to solve the problem—enacting federal legislation—but her working thesis
isn’t specific enough. The student’s final thesis offers a specific solution to the problem she identifies and helps her focus her draft.

**FINAL THESIS**

By restricting campaign spending, Congress could enable candidates without personal wealth to compete more effectively in national elections.

Keep in mind as you draft your working thesis that a successful thesis is a promise to the reader; it points both the writer and the reader in a definite direction. For a more detailed discussion of the thesis, see 1e.

**1d Sketch a plan.**

Once you have generated some ideas and formulated a working thesis, you might want to sketch an informal outline to see how you will support your thesis and to figure out a tentative structure for your ideas. Informal outlines can take many forms. Perhaps the most common is simply the thesis followed by a list of major ideas.
Working thesis: Television advertising should be regulated to help prevent childhood obesity.

- Children watch more television than ever.
- Snacks marketed to children are often unhealthy and fattening.
- Childhood obesity can cause diabetes and other problems.
- Dealing with these problems costs taxpayers billions of dollars.
- Therefore, these ads are actually costing the public money.
- But if advertising is free speech, do we have the right to regulate it?
- We regulate alcohol and cigarette ads on television, so why not advertisements for soda and junk food?

If you began by jotting down a list of ideas (see p. 15), you can turn the list into a rough outline by crossing out some ideas, adding others, and putting the ideas in a logical order.

**Planning with headings**

When writing a long college paper or a business document, consider using headings to guide your planning and to help your readers follow the organization of your final draft. While planning, you can insert your working thesis, experiment with possible headings, and type chunks of text beneath each heading. You may need to try grouping your ideas in a few different ways to suit your purpose and audience.

**Making the most of your handbook**

Headings can help writers plan and readers understand a document.
- Using headings: 58b
- Papers organized with headings: 56f, 57f

**When to use a formal outline**

Early in the writing process, rough outlines have certain advantages: They can be produced quickly, they are obviously tentative, and they can be revised easily. However, a formal outline may be useful later in the writing process, after you have written a rough draft, especially if your topic is complex.

A formal outline helps you see whether the parts of your essay work together and whether your essay’s structure is
logical. A formal outline will often make clear which parts of your draft should be rearranged and which parts don’t fit at all.

The following formal outline brought order to the research paper in 54c, on Internet surveillance in the workplace. The student’s thesis is an important part of the outline. Everything else in the outline supports it, either directly or indirectly.

Thesis: Although companies often have legitimate concerns that lead them to monitor employees’ Internet usage—from expensive security breaches to reduced productivity—the benefits of electronic surveillance are outweighed by its costs to employees’ privacy and autonomy.

I. Although employers have always monitored employees, electronic surveillance is more efficient.
   A. Employers can gather data in large quantities.
   B. Electronic surveillance can be continuous.
   C. Electronic surveillance can be conducted secretly, with keystroke logging programs.

II. Some experts argue that employers have legitimate reasons to monitor employees’ Internet usage.
   A. Unmonitored employees could accidentally breach security.
   B. Companies are legally accountable for the online actions of employees.

III. Despite valid concerns, employers should value employee morale and autonomy and avoid creating an atmosphere of distrust.
   A. Setting the boundaries for employee autonomy is difficult in the wired workplace.
      1. Using the Internet is the most popular way of wasting time at work.
      2. Employers can’t easily determine if employees are working or surfing the Web.
   B. Surveillance can create resentment among employees.
      1. Web surfing can relieve stress, and restricting it can generate tension between managers and workers.
      2. Enforcing Internet usage can seem arbitrary.
IV. Surveillance may not increase employee productivity, and trust may benefit productivity.
   A. A company shouldn’t care how many hours salaried employees work as long as they get the job done.
   B. Casual Internet use can actually benefit companies.
      1. The Internet may spark business ideas.
      2. The Internet may suggest ideas about how to operate more efficiently.

V. Employees’ rights to privacy are not well defined by the law.
   A. Few federal guidelines on electronic surveillance exist.
   B. Employers and employees are negotiating the boundaries without legal guidance.
   C. As technological capabilities increase, there will be an increased need to define boundaries.

Guidelines for constructing an outline

1. Put the thesis at the top.
2. Make items at the same level parallel grammatically (see section 9).
3. Use sentences unless phrases are clear.
4. Use the conventional system of numbers, letters, and indents:

   I.
   A. 
   B. 
      1. 
      2. 
         a. 
         b. 

   II.
   A. 
   B. 
      1. 
      2. 
         a. 
         b.
For most types of writing, draft an introduction that includes a thesis.

Generally, the introduction to a piece of writing announces the main point; the body develops it, usually in several paragraphs; the conclusion drives it home. You can begin drafting, however, at any point. If you find it difficult to introduce a paper that you have not yet written, try drafting the body first and saving the introduction for later.

Your introduction will usually be a paragraph of 50 to 150 words (in a longer paper, it may be more than one paragraph). Perhaps the most common strategy is to open with a few sentences that engage the reader and establish your purpose for writing, your main point. The sentence stating the main point is called a thesis. (See also 1c.) In the following examples, the thesis has been italicized.

The debate over athletes’ use of performance-enhancing substances is getting more complicated as biotechnologies such as gene therapy become a reality. The availability of these new methods of boosting performance will force us to decide what we value most in sports—displays of physical excellence developed through hard work or victory at all costs. For centuries, spectators and athletes have cherished the tradition of fairness in sports. While sports competition is, of course, largely about winning, it is also about the means by which a player or team wins. Athletes who use any type of biotechnology give themselves an unfair advantage and disrupt the sense of fair play, and they should be banned from competition. —Jamal Hammond, student
As the United States industrialized in the nineteenth century, using desperate immigrant labor, social concerns took a backseat to the task of building a prosperous nation. The government did not regulate industries and did not provide an effective safety net for the poor or for those who became sick or injured on the job. However, immigrants and the poor did have a few advocates. Settlement houses such as Hull-House in Chicago provided information, services, and a place for reform-minded individuals to gather and work to improve the conditions of the urban poor. Alice Hamilton was one of these reformers. Her work at Hull-House spanned twenty-two years and later expanded throughout the nation. *Hamilton's efforts helped to improve the lives of immigrants and drew attention to problems and people that until then had been virtually ignored.*

—Laurie McDonough, student

Ideally, the sentences leading to the thesis should hook the reader, perhaps with one of the following:

- a startling statistic or an unusual fact
- a vivid example
- a description
- a paradoxical statement
- a quotation or a bit of dialogue
- a question
- an analogy
- an anecdote

Whether you are writing for a scholarly audience, a professional audience, a public audience, or a general audience, you cannot assume your readers’ interest in the topic. The hook should spark curiosity and offer readers a reason to continue.

Although the thesis frequently appears at the end of the introduction, it can just as easily appear at the beginning. Much work-related writing commonly begins with the thesis.
Flextime scheduling, which has proved its effectiveness at the Library of Congress, should be introduced on a trial basis at the main branch of the Montgomery County Public Library. By offering flexible work hours, the library can boost employee morale, cut down on absenteeism, and expand its hours of operation.

—David Warren, student

For some types of writing, it may be difficult or impossible to express the central idea in a thesis sentence; or it may be unwise or unnecessary to put a thesis sentence in the essay itself. A personal narrative, for example, may have a focus too subtle to be distilled in a single sentence. Strictly informative writing, like that found in many business memos, may be difficult to summarize in a thesis. In some academic fields, such as nursing, writers may produce reports that do not require a thesis. In such instances, do not try to force the central idea into a thesis sentence. Instead, think in terms of an overriding purpose, which may or may not be stated directly.

**Characteristics of an effective thesis**

An effective thesis sentence should be a central idea that requires supporting evidence; it should be of adequate scope for an essay of the assigned length; and it should be sharply focused. (See also 1c.)
When constructing a thesis sentence, you should ask yourself whether you can successfully develop it with the sources available to you and for the purpose you’ve identified. Also ask if you can explain why readers should be interested in reading an essay that explores this thesis. If your thesis addresses a question or problem that intrigues you, then it will probably interest your readers as well. If your thesis would be obvious to everyone, then your readers will be less compelled to read on.

A thesis must require proof or further development through facts and details; it cannot itself be a fact or a description.

DRAFT

The first polygraph was developed by Dr. John A. Larson in 1921.

PROBLEM The thesis is too factual. A reader could not disagree with it or debate it; no further development of this idea is required.

STRATEGY Enter a debate by posing a question about your topic that has more than one possible answer. For example: Should the polygraph be used by private employers? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

REVISED

Because the polygraph has not been proved reliable, even under controlled conditions, its use by private employers should be banned.

A thesis should be an answer to a question, not a question itself.

DRAFT

Would John F. Kennedy have continued to escalate the war in Vietnam if he had lived?

PROBLEM The thesis is a question, not an answer to a question.

STRATEGY Take a position on your topic by answering the question you have posed. Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

REVISED

Although John F. Kennedy sent the first American troops to Vietnam before he died, an analysis of his foreign policy suggests that he would not have escalated the war had he lived.
A thesis should be of sufficient scope for your assignment; it should not be too broad.

**DRAFT**

Mapping the human genome has many implications for health and science.

**PROBLEM** The thesis is *too broad*. Even in a very long research paper, you would not be able to discuss all the implications of mapping the human genome.

**STRATEGY** Consider subtopics of your original topic. Once you have chosen a subtopic, take a position in an ongoing debate and pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Should people be tested for genetic diseases? Your thesis should be your answer to the question.

**REVISED**

Although scientists can now detect genetic predisposition for specific diseases, policymakers should establish clear guidelines about whom to test and under what circumstances.

A thesis also should not be too narrow.

**DRAFT**

A person who carries a genetic mutation linked to a particular disease might or might not develop that disease.

**PROBLEM** The thesis is *too narrow*. It does not suggest any argument or debate about the topic.

**STRATEGY** Identify challenging questions that readers might have about your topic. Then pose a question that has more than one answer. For example: Why should people be tested for genetic diseases? Your thesis should be your answer to this question.

**REVISED**

Although scientists can now detect genetic predisposition for specific diseases, policymakers should establish clear guidelines about whom to test and under what circumstances.
Understanding the comment

When a teacher or tutor points out that your thesis is unclear, the comment often signals that readers may have a hard time identifying your essay’s main point.

One student wrote this introductory paragraph in response to an assignment that asked her to analyze the changing roles of mothers or fathers.

Fathers are more involved in the lives of their children today than they used to be. In the past, the father’s primary role was as the provider; child care was most often left to the mother or other relatives. However, today’s father drives to dance lessons, coaches his child’s baseball team, hosts birthday parties, and provides homework help. Do more involved fathers help or hinder the development of their children?

A writer’s thesis, or main point, should be phrased as a statement, not a question. To revise, the student could answer the question she has posed, or she could pose a new question and answer it. After considering her evidence, she needs to decide what position she wants to take, state this position clearly, and show readers why this position—her thesis—matters.

Similar comments: vague thesis • state your position • your main point?

Revising when your thesis is unclear

1. **Ask questions.** What is the thesis, position, or main point of the draft? Can you support it with the available evidence?

2. **Reread your entire draft.** Because ideas develop as you write, you may find that your conclusion contains a clearer statement of your main point than your current thesis does. Or you may find your thesis elsewhere in your draft.

3. **Try revising your thesis** by framing it as an answer to a question you pose, the resolution of a problem you identify, or a position you take in a debate. And put your thesis to the “So what?” test: Why would a reader be interested in this thesis?

More help with writing a clear thesis: 1c and 1e
A thesis should be sharply focused, not too vague. Avoid fuzzy, hard-to-define words such as *interesting*, *good*, or *disgusting*.

**DRAFT THESIS**

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is an interesting structure.

**PROBLEM**

This thesis is *too fuzzy and unfocused*. It's difficult to define *interesting*, and the sentence doesn't give the reader any cues about where the essay is going.

**STRATEGY**

*Focus your thesis with concrete language and a clear plan.* Pose a question about the topic that has more than one answer. For example: How does the physical structure of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial shape the experience of visitors? Your thesis—your answer to the question—should use specific language that engages readers to follow your argument.

**REVISED THESIS**

By inviting visitors to see their own reflections in the wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial creates a link between the present and the past.

**EXERCISE 1–3**

In each of the following pairs, which sentence might work well as a thesis for a short paper? What is the problem with the other one? Is it too factual? Too broad? Too vague?

1. a. By networking with friends, a single parent can manage to strike a balance among work, school, a social life, and family.
   b. Single parents face many challenges as they try to juggle all of their responsibilities.

2. a. At the Special Olympics, athletes with disabilities show that, with hard work and support from others, they can accomplish anything—that they can indeed be winners.
   b. Working with the Special Olympics program is rewarding.

3. a. History 201, taught by Professor Brown, is offered at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
   b. Whoever said that history is nothing but polishing tombstones must have missed History 201, because in Professor Brown’s class history is very much alive.

4. a. So far, research suggests that zero-emissions vehicles are not a sensible solution to the problem of steadily increasing air pollution.
b. Because air pollution is of serious concern to many people today, several US government agencies have implemented plans to begin solving the problem.

5. a. Anorexia nervosa is a dangerous and sometimes deadly eating disorder occurring mainly in young, upper-middle-class teens.

b. The eating disorder anorexia nervosa is rarely cured by one treatment alone; only by combining drug therapy with psychotherapy and family therapy can the patient begin the long, torturous journey to wellness.

Draft the body.

The body of the essay develops support for your thesis, so it’s important to have at least a working thesis before you start writing. What does your thesis promise readers? Try to keep your response to that question in mind as you draft the body.

You may already have written an introduction that includes your thesis. If not, as long as you have a thesis you can begin developing the body and return later to the introduction. If your thesis suggests a plan (see 1e) or if you have sketched a preliminary outline, try to block out your paragraphs accordingly. Draft the body of your essay by writing a paragraph about each supporting point you listed in the planning stage. If you do not have a plan, pause for a few moments and sketch one (see 1d).

Keep in mind that often you might not know what you want to say until you have written a draft. It is possible to begin without a plan—assuming you are prepared to treat your first attempt as a “discovery draft” that will be radically rewritten once you discover what you really want to say. Whether or not you have a plan when you begin drafting, you can often figure out a workable order for your ideas by stopping each time you start a new paragraph to think about what your readers will need to know to follow your train of thought.

For more detailed advice about paragraphs in the body of an essay, see 3.
In this body paragraph, a student responds to an assignment that asked him to interview a group of international students and describe the challenges of studying in the United States.

There are many cultural differences between the United States and Italy. Italian citizens do not share many of the same attitudes or values as American citizens. Such differences make it hard for some Italian students to feel comfortable coming to the United States for extended periods of time, even for an academic year.

The paragraph presents a student’s claim but doesn’t include specific examples or evidence to support the claim. To revise, the student might focus on one specific example of cultural differences between the United States and Italy. The student might then ask: What vivid details illustrate this cultural difference? The answer to that question will provide specific evidence to inform and persuade readers.

Similar comments: need examples • too general • evidence?

Strategies for revising when your writing needs to be more specific

1. **Reread your topic sentence** to understand the focus of the paragraph.

2. **Ask questions.** Does the paragraph contain claims that need support? Have you provided evidence—specific examples, vivid details and illustrations, statistics and facts—to help readers understand your ideas and find them persuasive?

3. **Choose exact, active, and engaging words** as you shape your evidence. And remember that details and examples don’t speak for themselves. You’ll need to interpret your evidence to show readers how it supports your claims.

More help with using specific evidence: 5e
**TIP:** As you draft, keep careful notes and records of all the sources you read and consult. (See 48b.) If you quote, paraphrase, or summarize a source, include a citation, even in your draft. You will save time and avoid plagiarism if you follow the rules of citation and documentation while drafting.

**1g Draft a conclusion.**

A conclusion should remind readers of the essay’s main idea without repeating it. Often the concluding paragraph can be relatively short. By the end of the essay, readers should already understand your main point; your conclusion drives it home and, perhaps, gives readers something more to consider.

In addition to echoing your main idea, a conclusion might briefly summarize the essay’s key points, propose a course of action, offer advice, discuss the topic’s wider significance, or pose a question for future study. To conclude an essay analyzing the shifting roles of women in the military, one student discusses her topic’s implications for society as a whole.

As the military continues to train women in jobs formerly reserved for men, our understanding of women’s roles in society will no doubt continue to change. When news reports of women training for and taking part in combat operations become commonplace, reports of women becoming CEOs, police chiefs, and even president of the United States will cease to surprise us. Or perhaps we have already reached this point. —Rosa Broderick, student

To make the conclusion memorable, you might include a detail, an example, or an image from the introduction to bring readers full circle; a quotation or a bit of dialogue; an anecdote; or a witty or ironic comment. To conclude an essay explaining how credit card companies hook college students, one student brings readers full circle by echoing his thesis and ending with a familiar phrase borrowed from popular culture.

Credit cards are a convenient part of life, and there is nothing wrong with having one or two of them. Before signing up for a particular card, however, college students should