2

DEVELOPING AN ESSAY

Analyzing a text as shown in the preceding chapter is valuable in itself: it can be fun, and the process helps you better understand and appreciate whatever you read. But it can make you a better writer, too, by showing you how to read your own work critically, broadening the range of strategies available to you, and suggesting subjects for you to write about.

The essays collected in this book are accompanied by a range of material designed to help you use your reading to write effectively. Every reading is followed by several detailed questions that will help you read it critically and examine the writing strategies that make it successful. Accompanying the questions are writing topics—ideas for you to adapt and develop into essays of your own. Some of these call for your analysis of the essay; others lead you to examine your own experiences or outside sources in light of the essay's ideas. Chapters 5–14 each conclude with two additional sets of writing topics: one group provides a range of subjects for using the chapter's method of development; the other encourages you to focus on thematic connections in the chapter.

To help you develop your writing, *The Compact Reader* also offers several tools that guide you through composing effective essays. This chapter and the next two (on revising and editing) offer specific ways to strengthen and clarify your work as you move through the **writing process**, the activities that contribute to a finished piece of writing. This process is presented as a sequence of stages: analyzing the writing situation, generating ideas, focusing, shaping, revising, and editing. As you'll discover, these stages are actually somewhat arbitrary because writers rarely move in straight lines through fixed steps. Instead, just as they do when thinking or talking, writers continually circle back over covered territory, each time picking up more information or seeing new relationships, until their meaning is clear to themselves and can be made clear to readers. No two

writers work in exactly the same way, either. Still, viewing the process in stages does help sort out its many activities so you can develop the process or processes that work best for you.

Complementing the general overview of the writing process in Part One of this book are the more specific introductions to the methods of development in Part Two—narration, comparison and contrast, definition, and so on. These method introductions follow the pattern set here by also moving through stages, but they take up the particular concerns of each method, such as organizing a comparison or clarifying a definition. (See the inside back cover for a guide to the topics covered.)

Getting Started

Every writing situation involves several elements: you communicate a *thesis* (central idea) about a subject to an *audience* of readers for a particular *purpose*. At first you may not be sure of your idea or your purpose. You may not know how you want to approach your readers, even when you know who they are. Your job in getting started, then, is to explore options and make choices.

Considering Your Subject and Purpose

A **subject** for writing may arise from any source, including your observations or reading, a suggestion in this book, or an assignment from your instructor. In the previous chapter, Edward P. Jones's essay on his first months of college demonstrates how an excellent subject can be found by examining one's own experience. Whatever its source, the subject should be something you care enough about to probe deeply and to stamp with your own perspective.

This personal stamp comes from your **purpose**, your reason for writing. The purpose may be one of the following:

- *To express* the thoughts and emotions triggered by an amusing, revealing, or instructive experience.
- *To explain* a subject so that readers understand it or see it in a new light.
- *To persuade* readers to accept an idea or opinion or to take a certain action.

A single essay may sometimes have more than one purpose: for instance, a writer might both explain what it's like to have a disability and try to persuade readers to respect special parking zones for people with disabilities. Your reasons for writing may be clear to you early on, arising out of the subject and its significance for you. But you may need to explore your subject for a while—even to the point of writing a draft—before you know what you want to do with it.

Considering Your Audience

Either very early, when you first begin exploring your subject, or later, as a check on what you have generated, you may want to make a few notes on your anticipated **audience**. The notes are optional, but thinking about audience definitely is not. Your topic and purpose, as well as your thesis, supporting ideas, details and examples, organization, style, tone, and language—all should reflect your answers to the following questions:

- *Who will read your writing?*
- *What impression do you want to make on readers?*
- *What do readers already know about your subject? What do they need to know?*
- *What are readers' likely expectations and assumptions about your subject?*
- *How can you build on readers' previous knowledge, expectations, and assumptions to bring them around to your view?*

These considerations are crucial to achieving the fundamental purpose of all public writing: communication. Accordingly, they come up again and again in the chapter introductions and the questions after each essay.

Generating Ideas

Ideas for your writing—whether your subject itself or the many smaller ideas and details that shape what you have to say about it—may come to you in a rush, or you may need to hunt for them. (You may also need to do some research to learn more about your subject or to gather support for your ideas. See the Appendix.) Writers use a variety of discovery techniques, from jotting down thoughts while they pursue other activities to writing concentratedly for a set period. Here are a few techniques you might try.

Talking with Others

When you write, you essentially join a conversation on a subject: you add to what other writers have said with your own thoughts. So it makes sense that one of the best ways to generate ideas for writing is to talk with other people. Speaking and listening will give you new insights into a subject and reveal connections that you may not have found on your own. That is why much of your time in class will be spent discussing what you read. To get the most out of those conversations, follow these guidelines:

- *Be prepared.* Do the assigned reading, and jot down your thoughts and questions before class. If you will be discussing one of the essays in this book, you can use the questions that accompany the essay to help prepare your notes.
- *Pay attention.* When others speak, listen. Even if you disagree with people or detect flaws in their reasoning, respect their points of view. Ask questions, and try to express their thoughts in your own words to better understand them.
- *Build on each other's ideas.* The purpose of discussion is to discover new perspectives and to find common ground, so feel free to add your own thoughts to what others have to say.

As you discuss readings and exchange ideas with others, you'll almost certainly discover new ways of thinking about a subject. Write those ideas down. Later, you can explore them further using the other techniques described in this section.

Journal Writing

Many writers keep a **journal**, a record of thoughts and observations. Whether in a paper notebook or a digital file, journal entries give you an opportunity to explore ideas just for yourself, free of concerns about readers who will judge what you say or how you say it. Regular journal entries can also make you more comfortable with the act of writing and build your confidence. Indeed, writing teachers often require their students to keep journals for these reasons.

In a journal you can write about whatever interests, puzzles, or disturbs you. Here are just a few possible uses:

- *Prepare* for a class by taking notes on the assigned reading.
- *Record* summaries of classroom discussions.

- *Analyze* a situation that's causing you problems.
- *Imitate* a writer you admire, such as a poet or songwriter.
- *Explore* your reactions to a movie or television program.
- *Confide* your dreams and fears.

Any of this material could provide a seed for writing, but you can also use a journal deliberately to develop ideas for assignments. One approach is built into this book: before every essay you will find several quotations and a suggestion for journal writing—all centering on the topic of the essay. In responding to the quotations and journal prompt preceding Edward P. Jones's "Shacks" (p. 9), for example, you might examine your attitudes toward writing, recount a particular episode from your own first months of school, or consider your reasons for taking a writing class. One student, Nicole Lang, wrote this journal entry in response to the material preceding Jones's essay:

> Does writing come easily to me? No! I mean, I have no trouble commenting on somebody's Facebook post or sending out a tweet to my friends, but papers for school? Nightmare! Writing is HARD. I don't feel like I have anything to say and then if I do think of something I just get stuck. Who cares what I think? I guess that's the point of this class. To learn, right? But I wouldn't be here if it wasn't required, that's for sure.

Writing for herself, Lang felt free to explore what was on her mind, without worrying about correctness and without trying to make it clear to external readers what she meant by words such as *nightmare* and *stuck*. By articulating her mixed feelings about writing, Lang established a personal context in which to read Jones's essay, and that context made her a more engaged, more critical reader.

Lang used journal writing for another purpose as well: to respond to Jones's essay *after* she read it.

> Interesting that writing letters (who writes letters anymore?) helped Jones get through a difficult time in college. And I like the idea of "little shacks of life," that we don't need all that much to be happy—but aren't most of us in college because we want something better than a shack? Sure, Jones's shack apparently led him to a career as a writer, and it's nice that his infatuation with Sandra turned into a defining moment of his college experience, but not everyone is so lucky.

As this entry makes clear, Lang didn't come to any conclusions about writing or about Jones's essay. She did, however, begin to work out ideas that would serve as the start of a more considered critical response later on. (Further stages of Lang's writing process appear throughout the rest of this chapter and in the two chapters that follow.)

Freewriting

To discover ideas for a particular assignment, you may find it useful to try **freewriting**, or writing without stopping for a set amount of time, usually ten to fifteen minutes. In freewriting you push yourself to keep writing, following ideas wherever they lead, paying no attention to completeness or correctness or even sense. When she began composing an essay response to "Shacks," Nicole Lang produced this freewriting:

> In the context of Jones's essay, it seems like college is an extension of high school. If that's true, then why go to college at all? College is expensive. Really expensive. But it's practically required for a good job so you have to come up with the money somehow. Loans! Jones was lucky he got to spend three months daydreaming. Who can afford that now? Not everyone can waste an entire semester building "shacks"—postponing reality. For a lot of us being an adult is not something that can be put off.

Notice that this freewriting is rough: the tone is informal, as if Lang were speaking to herself; some thoughts are left dangling; some sentences are shapeless or incomplete; some ideas are repeated. But none of this matters because the freewriting is just exploratory. Writing rapidly, without pausing to rethink or edit, actually pulled insights out of Lang. She moved from being vaguely uneasy with Jones's essay to developing an argument inspired by it. Then, with a more definite focus, she could begin drafting in earnest.

Brainstorming

Another technique that helps to pull ideas from you is **brainstorming**, listing ideas without stopping to judge or change them. As in freewriting, write without stopping for ten or fifteen minutes, jotting down everything that seems even remotely related to your subject. Don't stop to reread and rethink what you have written; just keep pulling and recording ideas, no matter how silly or dull or irrelevant they seem. When your time is up,

look over the list to identify the promising ideas, and discard the rest. Depending on how promising the remaining ideas are, you can resume brainstorming, try freewriting about them, or begin a draft.

Using the Methods of Development

The ten methods of development discussed in Part Two of this book can also help you expand your thinking. Try asking the following questions to spark ideas about your subject:

- **Narration** (Chapter 5): What is the story in the subject? How did it happen?
- **Description** (Chapter 6): How does the subject look, sound, smell, taste, and feel?
- **Example** (Chapter 7): How can the subject be illustrated? What are instances of it?
- **Division or Analysis** (Chapter 8): What are the subject's parts, and what is their relationship or significance?
- **Classification** (Chapter 9): What groups or categories can the subject be sorted into?
- **Process Analysis** (Chapter 10): How does the subject work, or how does someone do it?
- **Comparison and Contrast** (Chapter 11): How is the subject similar to or different from something else?
- **Definition** (Chapter 12): What are the subject's characteristics and boundaries?
- **Cause-and-Effect Analysis** (Chapter 13): Why did the subject happen? What were or may be its consequences?
- **Argument and Persuasion** (Chapter 14): Why do I believe as I do about the subject? Why do others have different opinions? How can I convince others to accept my opinion or believe as I do?

The kinds of questions suggested by these methods can open up perspectives you may not have considered; they can also help you begin to focus and shape your thoughts. As you explore your subject and begin to draft, you might use the methods singly, with one dominating in an essay, or in combination, with different methods supporting varied aspects of your subject. Whether taken individually or together, each method provides a direction that can help you achieve your particular purpose for writing.

Forming a Thesis

Have you ever read a newspaper or magazine article and wondered, "What's the point?" Whether consciously or not, we expect a writer to *have* a point, a central idea that he or she wants readers to take away from the work. We also expect that idea to determine the content of the work—so that everything relates to it—and we expect the content in turn to demonstrate or prove the idea.

Arriving at a main idea, or **thesis**, is thus an essential part of the writing process. Sometimes it will occur to you the moment you hit on your subject—for instance, if you think of writing about the new course registration system because you want to make a point about its unfairness. More often, you will need to explore your thoughts for a while—even to the point of writing a draft or more—before you pin down just what you have to say. Even if your thesis will evolve over time, however, it's a good idea to draft it early because it can help keep you focused as you generate more ideas, seek evidence, and organize your thoughts.

▶ Identifying Your Main Point

A thesis is distinct from the subject of an essay. The subject is what an essay is about; the thesis captures a writer's unique understanding of one aspect of that subject. In the case of "Shacks," for example, the subject is college, but Jones's thesis—that struggling with self-expression can help young adults discover their talents and ambitions—makes a strong point that readers may not have contemplated on their own. In the essay draft that appears at the end of this chapter, student writer Nicole Lang takes the same subject—college—but she makes a completely different point: that contemporary students cannot afford to take their education for granted.

The distinction between a subject and a thesis is evident throughout this book. Each chapter of readings focuses on a single subject—such as travel, the environment, or work—yet the individual paragraphs and essays demonstrate the writers' unique perspectives on particular aspects of those general topics. The readings in Chapter 5, for instance, all center on the subject of youth, but no two writers take the same approach. Michael Ondaatje writes to capture the mystery of a snake that seemed immortal; Jonathan Rauch recalls the awkwardness of his first kiss; Annie Dillard uses a memorable incident to explain the thrill of misbehavior; Langston Hughes writes about a church revival to make a point about

innocence and faith; and student writer Lauren Fulmore reflects on the consequences of a runaway imagination.

To move from a general subject to a workable thesis for your own writing, keep narrowing your focus until you have something to say about the subject. For example, one writer decided to write about family but quickly discovered that the topic is too broad to work with. She then narrowed the subject to adoptive families, but even that covered too much territory. As she continued to tighten her focus, she first thought to discuss adopted children who try to contact their birth parents, then considered explaining how adoptees can locate the necessary information, and finally decided to discuss how legal and other barriers can impede adoptees' efforts to find their birth parents. In a few steps, the writer turned a broad subject into a manageable idea worth pursuing. The process isn't always simple, but it is a necessary first step in finding a working thesis.

▶ Drafting and Revising a Thesis Sentence

Once you've narrowed your subject and have something to say about it, the best way to focus on your thesis is to write it out in a **thesis sentence** (or sentences): an assertion that makes your point about the subject. Edward P. Jones states his thesis near the end of his essay "Shacks" (p. 9):

> [W]e are born with few tools with which to build our little shacks of life, and we are born with even less knowledge of how to use those tools.

Jones's thesis statement, while poetic, nonetheless ties together all of the other ideas and details in his essay; it also reflects his purpose in writing the essay and focuses his readers on a single point. All effective thesis sentences do this: they go beyond generalities or mere statements of fact to express the writer's unique perspective on the subject. Notice the differences in the following sentences that Nicole Lang considered for her response to "Shacks":

ANNOUNCEMENT OF TOPIC In this essay, I will discuss the purpose of going to college.

STATEMENT OF FACT Many college students take out loans to finance their education.

GENERAL STATEMENT Not everyone has the time or resources to dedicate an entire semester to building "shacks" and postponing reality.

EFFECTIVE THESIS SENTENCE For those who struggle just to pay for the opportunity, a college education has to serve the more concrete purpose of preparing for employment.

CHECKLIST FOR AN EFFECTIVE THESIS

- *Have you narrowed your subject to a focused topic?* Can that topic be managed in the space and time available for your writing project?
- *What main point do you want to make about your topic?* Can you express that point as a debatable assertion or a unique perspective? Be sure that your thesis does more than announce your topic, repeat a fact, or make a broad generalization. Instead, use the opportunity to explicitly state your opinion or articulate your fresh idea.
- *What is your purpose for writing?* Your thesis should make it clear to readers whether you intend to express your thoughts and feelings, explain a point or concept, or persuade them of an idea.
- *Does your thesis control the content of your essay?* Check that every subpoint and supporting detail in your draft supports your main idea.
- *Where, if at all, will you state your thesis?* It may help readers to know the point of your essay from the start, or they may be more receptive to your main idea if you withhold it until the end. If you choose not to state your thesis outright, readers should nonetheless be able to recognize your controlling idea without difficulty.

The first sentence identifies the topic of the paper, but gives no indication of the writer's purpose or perspective. The second sentence merely expresses a fact, not a main idea worth developing in an essay. The third sentence offers an opinion, but because it's a very broad assertion that few would dispute, it fails to capture readers' interest or make a significant point. The final sentence, however, makes a strong assertion about a narrow subject and gives readers an idea of what to expect from the rest of the essay.

Because the main point of an essay may change over the course of the writing process, the thesis sentence may also change, sometimes considerably. The following examples show how the writer discussed earlier moved from an explanatory to a persuasive purpose between the early stages of the writing process and the final draft of her adoption essay.

WORKING THESIS Adopted children can contact their birth parents, although sometimes the process is difficult.

REVISED THESIS Adopted children often need persistence to locate information about their birth parents.

FINAL THESIS Laws and traditions unfairly hamper adopted children from seeking information about their birth parents.

The first two sentences identify the subject of the essay, but they are broad and bland, and neither clearly focuses on the writer's interest: the impediments to obtaining information. In contrast, the final sentence makes a definitive assertion and clearly conveys the writer's persuasive purpose and opinion. Thus the sentence lets readers know what to expect: an argument that adopted children should be treated more fairly when they seek information about their birth parents. Readers will also expect some discussion of the "laws and traditions" that hamper adoptees' searches, what is "unfair" and "fair" in this situation, and what changes the writer proposes.

Commonly in academic writing, the thesis sentence comes near the beginning of an essay, typically at the end of the first paragraph, where it serves as a promise to examine a particular subject from a particular perspective. But as Edward P. Jones demonstrates by stating his thesis at the end, the thesis sentence may come elsewhere as long as it controls the whole essay. The thesis may even go unstated, as some essays in this book illustrate, but it still must govern every element of the work as if it were announced.

Organizing

Writers vary in the extent to which they arrange their material before they begin drafting, but most do establish some plan. A good time to do so is after you've explored your subject and come up with a good stock of ideas about it. Before you begin drafting, you can look over what you've got and consider the best ways to organize it.

▶ Creating a Plan

A writing plan may consist of a list of key points, a fuller list including specifics as well, or even a detailed formal outline—whatever gives order to your ideas and provides some direction for your writing.

As you'll see in later chapters, many of the methods of development suggest specific structures, most notably description, narration, classification, process analysis, and comparison and contrast. But even when the organization is almost built into the method, you'll find that some subjects demand more thoughtful plans than others. You may be able to draft a straightforward narrative of a personal experience with very little advance planning. But a nonpersonal narrative, or even a personal one involving complex events and time shifts, may require more thought about arrangement.

Though some sort of plan is almost always useful when drafting, resist any temptation at this stage to pin down every detail in its proper place. A huge investment in planning can hamper you during drafting, making it difficult to respond to new ideas and even new directions that may prove fruitful.

▶ Thinking in Paragraphs

Most essays consist of three parts: the introduction and the conclusion (discussed in the next section) and the **body**, the most substantial and longest part, which develops the main idea or thesis.

As you explore your subject, you will generate both ideas that directly support your thesis and more specific examples, details, and other evidence to support these ideas. In the following informal outline for Nicole Lang's first draft (pp. 29–30), you can see how each supporting idea, or subpoint, helps to build her working thesis:

WORKING THESIS Not everyone has the time or resources to dedicate an entire semester to building "shacks" and postponing reality.

SUBPOINT Many students are already adults.

SUBPOINT Other students are in school specifically for job training.

SUBPOINT A lot of students take on significant debt and will need jobs with good incomes to pay it off.

Lang uses specific evidence to develop each subpoint into a paragraph. In essence, the paragraphs are like mini-essays with their own main ideas and support. (See pp. 33–37 for more on paragraph structure.)

When you seek a plan for your ideas, look first for your subpoints, the main supports for your thesis. Use these as your starting points to work out your essay one chunk (or paragraph) at a time. You can sketch the supporting details and examples into your organizational plan, or you can wait until you begin drafting to get into the specifics.

▶ Considering the Introduction and Conclusion

You may not know for sure how you want to begin and end your essay until you're drafting or revising. Still, it can be helpful to consider the introduction and conclusion earlier, so you have a sense of how you might approach readers and what you might leave them with.

The basic opening and closing serve readers by demonstrating your interest in their needs and expectations:

- The **introduction** draws readers into the essay and focuses their attention on the main idea and purpose, often stated in a thesis sentence.
- The **conclusion** ties together the elements of the essay and provides a final impression for readers to take away with them.

These basic forms allow considerable room for variation. One essay may need two paragraphs of introduction but only a one-sentence conclusion, whereas another essay may require no formal introduction but a lengthy conclusion. How you begin and end depends on your subject and purpose, the kind of essay you are writing, and the likely responses of your readers.

Specific strategies for opening and closing essays are suggested in each chapter introduction and in the Glossary under *introductions* and *conclusions*.

Drafting

However detailed your organizational plan is, you should not view it as a rigid taskmaster while you are drafting your essay. **Drafting** is your chance to give expression to your ideas, filling them out, finding relationships, drawing conclusions. If you are like most writers, you will discover much of what you have to say while putting your thoughts into words. In fact, if your subject is complex or difficult for you to write about, you may need several drafts just to work out your ideas and their relationships.

▸ Writing, Not Revising

Some writers draft rapidly, rarely looking up from the paper or keyboard. Others draft in fits and starts, gazing out the window or doodling as much as writing. Any method that works is fine, but one method rarely works: collapsing drafting and revising into one stage, trying to do everything at once.

Write first; then revise. Concentrate on *what* you are saying, not on *how* you are saying it. You pressure yourself needlessly if you try to produce a well-developed, coherent, interesting, and grammatically correct paper all at once. You may have trouble getting words down because you're afraid to make mistakes, and worrying about mistakes may distract you from exploring your ideas fully. Awkwardness, repetition, wrong words, grammatical errors, misspellings—these and other more superficial concerns can be attended to in a later draft. The same goes for considering your readers' needs: like many writers, you may find that attention to readers during the first draft inhibits the flow of ideas. If so, postpone that attention until the second or third draft.

If you experience writer's block or just don't know how to begin, start writing the part you're most comfortable with. Writing in paragraph chunks, as described on page 27, will also make drafting more manageable. You can start with your thesis sentence—or at least keep it in view as a reminder of your purpose and main idea. But if you find yourself pulled away from the thesis by a new idea, let go and follow, at least for a while. If your purpose and main idea change as a result of such exploration, you can always revise your thesis accordingly.

▸ Nicole Lang's First Draft

Some exploratory work by student Nicole Lang appears on pages 20 and 21. What follows is the first draft she subsequently wrote on the purpose of college. The draft is very rough, with frequent repetitions, wandering paragraphs, unsupported ideas, and many other flaws. But such weaknesses are not important at this early stage. The draft gave Lang the opportunity to discover what she had to say, to explore her ideas, and to link them in rough sequence.

> In Edward P. Jones's essay "Shacks," he writes about his first semester of college. He recalls writing three to five letters each week to his high school crush, Sandra Walker, in the hopes that she would come to love him. Unfortunately, his attempts to win Sandra's affection were met with little enthusiasm. This experience gave him something important that helped him get through a difficult time of adjustment for students entering college, but when he says, "It is amazing the little shacks of life we can build when it seems that so much is at stake," I can't help but wonder what was really at stake for Jones. Not everyone has the luxury to indulge in three months of emotional growth, to look for talents they may not even know they have. Not everyone has the time or resources to dedicate an entire semester to building "shacks" and postponing reality.

Jones seems to think of college as an extension of high school. A place to grow up, if just a little. That may be true for some people. But adulthood cannot be put off for many students.

A growing number of college students are adults over the age of 25. Getting a degree will give them the skills they need for a better job and prove to employers that they can work hard. Jones's understanding that his infatuation with Sandra turned into a defining moment of his college experience is nice, but he doesn't represent the financially burdened students of today.

Writing doesn't come as easily to me as it did for Jones. While I struggle, I understand the importance of the education I am receiving. Its important to find a career path that feels meaningful and fulfilling. But it is also important to find a job that can give you economic stability that will outweigh the significant cost of the degree. Although it would be nice to discover ourselves while we're here, it all comes down to time and money.

Jones's "shack" in college led him to a successful career as a writer, but not everyone is as lucky. Our shacks are different, and some are built later than others. For students who struggle just to pay for the opportunity, college serves the more concrete purpose of preparing us for employment—and that's OK.

3

REVISING

The previous chapter took you through the first-draft stage of the writing process, when you have a chance to work out your ideas without regard for what others may think. This chapter describes the crucial next stage, when you actively consider your readers: revising to focus and shape your meaning.

Revision means "re-seeing." Looking at your draft as your reader would, you cut, add, and reorganize until the ideas make sense on their own. Revision is not the same as editing. In revising, you make fundamental changes in content and structure. **Editing** comes later: once you're satisfied with the revised draft, you work on the sentences and words, attending to grammar, punctuation, and the like (see Chapter 4). The separation of these two stages is important because attention to little changes distracts from a view of the whole. If you try to edit while you revise, you'll be more likely to miss the big picture. You may also waste effort perfecting sentences you'll later decide to cut.

Reading Your Own Work Critically

Perhaps the biggest challenge of revision is reading your own work objectively, as a reader would. To gain something like a reader's critical distance from your draft, try one or more of the following techniques:

- *Put your first draft aside for at least a few hours—and preferably overnight—before attempting to revise it.* You may have further thoughts in the interval, and you will be able to see your work more objectively when you return to it.
- *Ask others to read and comment on your draft.* Your teacher may ask you and your classmates to exchange drafts so that you can help each other revise. But even without such a procedure, you can benefit from

another person's responses. Keep an open mind to comments, and ask questions when you need more information.

- *Make an outline of your draft* by listing what you cover in each paragraph. Such an outline can show gaps, overlaps, and problems in organization. (See also p. 27.)
- *Read the draft out loud.* Speaking the words and hearing them can help to create distance from them.
- *Imagine you are someone else*—a friend, perhaps, or a particular person in your intended audience—and read the draft through that person's eyes, as if for the first time.
- *Print a double-spaced copy of your draft.* It's much easier to read text on paper than on a screen, and you can spread out printed pages to see the whole paper at once. Once you've finished revising, transferring changes to the computer requires little effort.

Looking at the Whole Draft

Revision involves seeing your draft as a whole, focusing mainly on your purpose and thesis, the support for your thesis, and the movement among ideas. You want to determine what will work and what won't for readers—where the draft strays from your purpose, leaves a hole in the development of your thesis, does not flow logically or smoothly, digresses, or needs more details. (See the revision checklist on p. 39.) When rewriting, you may need to cut entire paragraphs, condense paragraphs into sentences, add passages of explanation, or rearrange sections.

Purpose and Thesis

In the press of drafting, you may lose sight of why you are writing or what your main idea is. Both your purpose and your thesis may change as you work out your meaning, so that you start in one place and end somewhere else or even lose track of where you are.

Your first goal in revising, then, is to see that your essay is well focused. Readers should grasp a clear purpose right away, and they should find that you have achieved it at the end. They should see your main idea, your thesis, very early, usually by the end of the introduction, and they should think that you have proved or demonstrated the thesis when they reach the last paragraph.

Like many writers, you may sometimes start with one thesis and finish with another, in effect writing into your idea as you draft. In many cases you'll need to rewrite your thesis statement to reflect what you actually wrote in your draft. Or you may need to upend your essay, plucking your thesis out of the conclusion and starting over with it, providing the subpoints and details to develop it (such was the case for student writer Nicole Lang, whose revised response to Edward P. Jones's "Shacks" appears at the end of this chapter). You'll probably find the second draft much easier to write because you'll know better what you want to say, and the next round of revision after that will go even more smoothly.

Development

Part of establishing that your draft fulfills your purpose is making sure that your thesis is fully developed. When you **develop** an idea, you provide concrete and specific details, examples, facts, opinions, and other evidence to make the idea vivid and true in readers' minds. Readers will know only as much as you tell them about your thesis and its support. Gaps, vague statements, and unsupported conclusions will undermine your efforts to win their interest and agreement.

Consider, for example, the following paragraph from Nicole Lang's first draft (pp. 29–30):

> Jones seems to think of college as an extension of high school. A place to grow up, if just a little. That may be true for some people. But adulthood cannot be put off for many students.

Lang felt she had a good point about adult students, but on reviewing her draft she realized she hadn't backed up her **generalization** with any evidence. So in revision she added an example from her personal experience:

> Jones seems to think of college as an extension of high school. A place to grow up, if just a little. That may be true for some people. But adulthood cannot be put off for many students. For example, my cousin Robert is 29 years old and he has a young child and a job that barely pays the bills. He takes nite classes at a community college so he can qualify for a better position, he does not have time at this stage in his life to dream about "some marvelous future." His shack is his son, and so he spends his time making a better life for himself and his family.

Notice that Lang's revised paragraph, while better developed and more convincing, contains several errors of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. That's fine; she'll attend to those details when she edits (see Chapter 4).

Development begins in sentences, when you use the most concrete and specific words you can muster to explain your meaning (see p. 53). At the level of the paragraph, these sentences develop the paragraph's topic (see "Focus on Paragraph Development" on p. 184). Then, at the level of the whole essay, these paragraphs develop the governing thesis.

The key to adequate development is a good sense of your readers' needs for information and evidence. The list of questions on page 18 can help you estimate these needs as you start to write; reconsidering the questions when you revise can help you see where your draft may fail to address, say, readers' unfamiliarity with your subject or possible resistance to your thesis.

The introduction to each method of development in Chapters 5–14 includes specific advice for meeting readers' needs when using the method to develop paragraphs and essays. When you sense that a paragraph or section of your essay is thin but you don't know how to improve it, you can also try the discovery techniques given on pages 18–22 or ask the questions for all the methods of development on page 22.

▶ Unity

When a piece of writing has **unity**, all its parts are related: the paragraphs build the central idea of the whole essay, and the sentences build the central idea of each paragraph. Readers do not have to wonder what the essay is about or what a particular passage has to do with the rest of the piece. Revising for unity strengthens your thesis by ensuring that every paragraph centers on your essay's main idea.

Consider Nicole Lang's revised draft on page 40. Her thesis sentence states, "For those of us who struggle just to pay for the opportunity, a college education has to serve the more concrete purpose of preparing for employment," and each paragraph clearly develops this idea, highlighting who those struggling students are, why they're in college, and how they expect to pay for it. This unity is true of Lang's revised draft but not of her first draft, where she opened with a lengthy summary of Jones's "Shacks." Some summary is helpful, of course, but the details blurred Lang's focus on today's college students and their goals. Recognizing as much, Lang condensed her discussion of "Shacks" to a single sentence when she revised. Deleting the distracting details also helped Lang clarify her introduction and her own purpose in writing.

Following the introduction, the body **paragraphs** of an essay are almost like mini-essays themselves, each developing an idea, or subpoint,

that supports the thesis (see p. 27). In fact, a body paragraph should have its own thesis, called its *topic*, usually expressed in a **topic sentence** or sentences. The rest of the paragraph develops the topic with specifics.

In this paragraph from the final draft of Nicole Lang's "Foundations" (pp. 56–57), for example, the topic sentence is underlined:

> Students in more traditional schools need to keep their eyes on the real world, too. The typical college graduate will start out owing nearly $30,000 in loans (Olsen). While it is important to find a career path that feels meaningful and fulfilling, it is just as important to earn an income that will outweigh the cost of higher education. We therefore need to focus on academic programs that will directly benefit our job prospects and help us repay our debts. With limited resources, most of us cannot afford shacks into which we can retreat—at least not yet.

Notice that every sentence of this paragraph relates to the topic sentence. Lang achieved this unity in revision (see pp. 40–41). In her first draft, she focused the opening sentences of this paragraph on herself:

> Writing doesn't come as easily to me as it did for Jones. While I struggle, I understand the importance of the education I am receiving.

If you look back at the full paragraph above, you'll see that Lang deleted these sentences and substituted a final one that focuses on the paragraph's topic: the need for students to plan for life after college.

Your topic sentences will not always fall at the very beginning of your paragraphs. Sometimes you'll need to create a transition from the preceding paragraph before stating the new paragraph's topic, or you'll build the paragraph to a topic sentence at the end. Sometimes, too, you'll write a paragraph with a topic but without a topic sentence. In all these cases, you'll need to have an idea for the paragraph and to unify the paragraph around that idea, so that all the specifics support and develop it.

▶ Coherence

Writing has **coherence** when readers can follow it easily and can see how the parts relate to each other. The ideas develop in a clear sequence, the sentences and paragraphs connect logically, and the connections are clear and smooth. The writing flows.

Coherence starts as sentences build paragraphs. Writers can draw on several devices to achieve coherence, including **repetition** or restatement of key words, **pronouns** such as *they* and *them* to substitute for nouns, and

parallelism, the use of similar grammatical structures for related ideas. (See "Focus on Coherence" on p. 153 and "Focus on Parallelism" on p. 244.) Every paragraph you write will require some devices to tie the sentences together.

One of the most useful devices for achieving paragraph coherence is a liberal use of **transitions**, words and phrases that clearly link the parts of sentences and whole sentences. Transitions may indicate time (*later, soon*), place (*nearby, farther away*), similarity (*also, likewise*), difference (*in contrast, instead*), and many other relationships. Check all your paragraphs to be sure that each sentence connects with the one before and that readers will see the connection without having to stop and reread.

Transitions work to link ideas between paragraphs as well as within them. When the ideas in two paragraphs are closely related, a simple word or phrase at the start of the second one may be all that's needed to show the relation. In each example below, the underlined transition opens the topic sentence of the paragraph:

> Moreover, the rising costs of health care have long outpaced inflation.
>
> However, some kinds of health-care plans have proved much more expensive than others.

When a paragraph is beginning a new part of the essay or otherwise changing direction, a sentence or more at the beginning will help explain the shift. In the next example, the first sentence summarizes the preceding paragraph, the second introduces the topic of the new paragraph, and the third gives the paragraph's topic sentence:

> Traditional health-care plans have thus become an unaffordable luxury for most individuals and businesses. The majority of those with health insurance now find themselves in so-called managed plans. Though they do vary, managed plans share at least two features: they pay full benefits only when the insured person consults an approved doctor, and they require prior approval for certain procedures.

Notice that underlined transitions provide further cues about the relationship of ideas.

Organization

Although transitions help alert readers to movement from one idea to another, they can't achieve coherence by themselves. Just as important is an overall **organization** that develops ideas in a clear sequence and directs readers in a familiar pattern:

- A **spatial** organization arranges information to parallel the way we scan people, objects, or places: top to bottom, left to right, front to back, near to far, or vice versa. This scheme is especially useful for description (Chapter 6).
- A **chronological** organization arranges events or steps as they occurred in time, first to last. Such an arrangement usually organizes a narrative (Chapter 5) or a process analysis (Chapter 10) and may also help with cause-and-effect analysis (Chapter 13).
- A **climactic** organization proceeds in order of climax, usually from least to most important, building to the most interesting example, the most telling point of comparison, the most significant argument. A climactic organization is most useful for example (Chapter 7), division or analysis (Chapter 8), classification (Chapter 9), comparison and contrast (Chapter 11), definition (Chapter 12), and argument and persuasion (Chapter 14), and it may also work for cause-and-effect analysis (Chapter 13).

The introduction to each method of development in Chapters 5–14 gives detailed advice on organizing with these arrangements and variations on them.

When revising your draft for organization, try outlining it by jotting down the topic sentence of each paragraph and the key support for each topic. The exercise will give you some distance from your ideas and words, allowing you to see the structure like a skeleton. Will your readers grasp the logic of your arrangement? Will they see why you move from each idea to the next one? After checking the overall structure, be sure you've built in enough transitions between sentences and paragraphs to guide readers through your ideas.

Tone

The **tone** of writing is like the tone of voice in speech: it expresses the writer's attitude toward his or her subject and audience. In writing we express tone with word choice and sentence structure. Notice the marked differences in these two passages discussing the same information on the same subject:

> Voice mail can be convenient, sure, but for callers it's usually more trouble than it's worth. We waste time "listening to the following menu choices," when we just want the live person at the end. All too often, there isn't even such a person!

> For callers the occasional convenience of voice mail generally does not compensate for its inconveniences. Most callers would prefer to speak to a live operator but must wait through a series of choices to reach that person. Increasingly, companies with voice-mail systems do not offer live operators at all.

The first passage is informal, expresses clear annoyance, and with *we* includes the reader in that attitude. The second passage is more formal and more objective, reporting the situation without involving readers directly.

Tone can range from casual to urgent, humorous to serious, sad to elated, pleased to angry, personal to distant. The particular tone you choose for a piece of writing depends on your purpose and your audience. For most academic and business writing, you will be trying to explain or argue a point. Your readers will be interested more in the substance of your writing than in a startling tone, and indeed an approach that is too personal, casual, or hostile could put them off.

Tone is something you want to evaluate in revision, along with whether you've achieved your purpose and whether you've developed your thesis adequately for your audience. But adjusting tone is largely a matter of replacing words and restructuring sentences, work that could distract you from an overall view of your essay. If you think your tone is off base, you may want to devote a separate phase of revision to it, after addressing unity, coherence, and the other matters discussed in this chapter. (For additional information, see "Focus on Tone" on pp. 340–41. For advice on sentence structures and word choices, see Chapter 4 on editing.)

Using a Revision Checklist

The following checklist summarizes the advice on revision given in this chapter. Use the checklist to remind yourself what to look for in your first draft. But don't try to answer all the questions in a single reading of the draft. Instead, take the questions one by one, rereading the whole draft for each. That way you'll be able to concentrate on each element with minimal distraction from the others.

Note that the introductions to the methods of development in Chapters 5–14 also have their own revision checklists. Combining this list with the one for the method you're using will produce a more targeted set of questions. (The guide inside the back cover will direct you to the discussion you want.)

CHECKLIST FOR REVISION

- *What is your purpose in writing?* Will it be clear to readers? Do you achieve it?
- *What is your thesis?* Where is it made clear to readers?
- *How well developed is your essay?* Where might readers need more evidence to understand your ideas and find them convincing?
- *How unified is your essay?* How does each body paragraph support your thesis? (Look especially at your topic sentences.) How does each sentence in the body paragraphs support the topic sentence of the paragraph?
- *How coherent is your essay?* Do repetition and restatement, pronouns, parallelism, and transitions link the sentences in paragraphs?
- *Does the overall organization clarify the flow of ideas?* How does your introduction work to draw readers in and preview your purpose and thesis? How does your conclusion work to pull the essay together and give readers a sense of completion?
- *What is the tone of your essay?* Is it appropriate for your purpose and your audience?

Nicole Lang's Revised Draft

Considering questions like those in the revision checklist led student writer Nicole Lang to revise the rough draft we saw on pages 29–30. Lang's revision follows. Notice that she changed her thesis statement to reflect what she had written and added supporting details for several points. She also came up with a title that helped her focus her main idea, revamped the introduction, tightened many passages, improved the coherence of her essay, and wrote a wholly new conclusion to sharpen her point. She did not try to improve her style or fix errors at this stage, leaving those activities for later editing.

Foundations

In Edward P. Jones's essay "Shacks," he ~~writes about his first semester of college. He~~ recalls writing ~~three to five~~ letters ~~each week~~ to his high school crush/ ~~Sandra Walker, in the hopes that she would come to love him. Unfortunately, his attempts to win Sandra's affection were met with little enthusiasm. This experience gave him something important~~ and discovering a sense of purpose that helped him get through a difficult time of adjustment for students entering college/ ~~but when he says, "It is amazing the little shacks of life we can build when it seems that~~ But when Jones mentions our ability to find structure when so much is at stake," I can't help but ~~wonder what was really at stake for Jones.~~ think about what is at stake for college students today. Not everyone has the luxury to indulge in three months of emotional growth, to look for talents they may not even know they have. ~~Not everyone has the time or resources to dedicate an entire semester to building "shacks" and postponing reality.~~ For those of us who struggle just to pay for the opportunity, a college education has to serve the more concrete purpose of preparing for employment.

Jones seems to think of college as an extension of high school. A place to grow up, if just a little. That may be true for some people. But adulthood cannot be put off for many students. For example, my cousin Robert is 29 years old and he has a young child and a job that barely pays the bills. He takes nite classes at a community college so he can qualify for a better position, he does not have time at this stage in his life to dream about "some marvelous future." His shack is his son, and so he spends his time making a better life for himself and his family.

A growing number of college students are adults over the age of 25. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and enroll for a number of reasons and they all understand the demands of a tough job market in a down economy. Getting a degree will give them the skills they need for a ~~better~~ particular job and prove to employers that they can work hard. ~~Jones's understanding~~

~~that his infatuation with Sandra turned into a defining moment of his college experience is nice, but he doesn't represent the financially burdened students of today.~~ Such vocational training is important and deserves respect. Those in more traditional schools need to keep there eye on the real world, too. ~~Writing doesn't come as easily to me as it did for Jones. While I struggle, I understand the importance of the education I am receiving.~~ The average student will graduate owing nearly $30,000 in student loans (source). Its important to find a career path that feels meaningful and fulfilling. But it is also ~~important to find a job that can give you economic stability~~ necessary to earn an income that will outweigh the ~~significant~~ cost of ~~the degree. Although it would be nice to discover ourselves while we're here, it all comes down to time and money.~~ higher education. This means we need to focus our time and effort on academic programs that will directly benefit our job prospects and put us in a position to repay our debts. With limited resources, not everyone can afford shacks they can retreat into. At least not yet.

~~Jones's "shack" in college led him to a successful career as a writer,~~ but not everyone is as ~~lucky. Our shacks are different,~~ and some are built later than others. For students who ~~struggle just to pay~~ for the opportunity, college serves the ~~more~~ concrete purpose of preparing us for employment ~~and~~ that's OK.

Jones makes a good point that a successful life depends on some kind of structure. To be truly sturdy, however, any structure requires a solid foundation. That's what college provides. We should certainly hope to discover ourselves and our hidden talents while we're here. But for financially burdened students the realities of higher education all come down to time and money. We have to be practical even as we dream.

4

EDITING

The final stage of the writing process is **editing** to clarify and polish your work. In editing you turn from global issues of purpose, thesis, development, unity, coherence, organization, and tone to more particular issues of sentences and words. The primary goal of editing is to ensure that your finished draft adheres to standard English grammar and usage. The formal language of US academic and business writing, **standard English** follows well-established expectations regarding sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary—the "rules" of writing—such as those addressed in this chapter.

Editing requires that you gain some distance from your work so that you can see it objectively. Try these techniques:

- *Work on a clean copy of your revised draft.* Edit on a printout rather than on the computer: it's more difficult to spot problems on a screen.
- *Read your revised draft aloud* so that you can hear the words. But be sure to read what you have actually written, not what you may have intended to write but didn't.
- *Try reading your draft backward sentence by sentence.* You'll be less likely to get caught up in the flow of your ideas and thus more likely to catch errors.
- *Keep a list of problems that others have pointed out in your previous writing.* Add this personal checklist to the one on page 55.

Checking Grammar and Punctuation

The first goal of editing is to express your ideas as clearly as possible, without sentence errors that might distract, confuse, or annoy readers. The guidelines here can help you catch some of the most common mistakes:

sentence fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, lack of agreement, awkward pronoun reference, problems with modifiers, and shifts in person, tense, or voice.

Sentence Fragments

A complete sentence has both a subject and a verb and expresses an entire thought. In contrast, a **sentence fragment** is a word group that is punctuated like a sentence but lacks a subject, lacks a verb, or expresses just part of a thought. Experienced writers sometimes use fragments deliberately, but unless you're very certain of what you're doing, make sure each sentence is complete by adding the necessary verb or subject or by attaching the word group to a nearby sentence:

FRAGMENT The price of oil unpredictable and rising.

COMPLETE The price of oil is unpredictable and rising.

FRAGMENT Consumers are warming up to alternative heating systems. Such as heat pumps and solar panels.

COMPLETE Consumers are warming up to alternative heating systems, such as heat pumps and solar panels.

Note that if you use a colon to introduce a list or a quotation, it must be preceded by a complete sentence. If it is not, remove the colon (before a list), replace it with a comma (before a quotation), or rewrite the first part of the sentence:

FRAGMENT Three newer options include: wind turbines, outdoor furnaces, and pellet stoves.

COMPLETE Three newer options include wind turbines, outdoor furnaces, and pellet stoves.

COMPLETE Three newer options are becoming common: wind turbines, outdoor furnaces, and pellet stoves.

FRAGMENT Local homeowner Marisol Gutierrez says: "Fossil fuels cost too much, both financially and environmentally."

COMPLETE Local homeowner Marisol Gutierrez says, "Fossil fuels cost too much, both financially and environmentally."

COMPLETE Local homeowner Marisol Gutierrez explains the appeal of such alternatives: "Fossil fuels cost too much, both financially and environmentally."

Run-on Sentences and Comma Splices

An **independent clause** can be punctuated like a sentence because it contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. Two independent clauses in a row, however, need to be clearly separated. If the clauses run together with nothing between them, they create a **run-on sentence**. If they run together with only a comma between them, they create a **comma splice**.

RUN-ON Pellet stoves are especially popular suppliers can't keep up with demand.

COMMA SPLICE Pellet stoves are especially popular, suppliers can't keep up with demand.

You can correct run-on sentences and comma splices in several ways:

- *Punctuate each clause as its own sentence.*
- *Insert a semicolon* (and maybe a conjunctive adverb such as *however, therefore,* or *moreover*) before the second clause.
- *Separate the clauses* with a comma along with *and, but, or, nor, for, so,* or *yet.*

EDITED Pellet stoves are especially popular. Suppliers can't keep up with demand.

EDITED Pellet stoves are especially popular; suppliers can't keep up with demand.

EDITED Pellet stoves are especially popular; therefore, suppliers can't keep up with demand.

EDITED Pellet stoves are especially popular, and suppliers can't keep up with demand.

Subject-Verb Agreement

The subject and verb in a sentence should match in grammatical form. Use singular verbs with singular subjects and plural verbs with plural subjects. Watch especially for the following situations.

- *When a group of words comes between the subject and the verb,* be careful not to mistake a noun in that word group (such as *pellets* below) for the subject of the sentence:

MISMATCHED The use of construction waste to make wood pellets contribute to their appeal.

MATCHED The use of construction waste to make wood pellets contributes to their appeal.

- *With compound subjects* (joined by *and*), use a plural verb:

MISMATCHED Low carbon emissions and the renewability of sawdust adds to the belief that pellets are environmentally friendly.

MATCHED Low carbon emissions and the renewability of sawdust add to the belief that pellets are environmentally friendly.

Pronouns

A **pronoun**—*I, you, he, she, they, it,* and so forth—refers to or replaces a noun in a sentence. Imprecise and mismatched pronouns are common in casual speech, but they can be distracting in writing. When you edit, aim for formal usage.

- *Check that pronouns have clearly stated antecedents.* An **antecedent** is the noun to which a pronoun refers. Rewrite sentences in which the reference is vague or only implied:

VAGUE Text messaging while driving is dangerous, but it doesn't deter everyone.

CLEAR Text messaging while driving is dangerous, but the risk doesn't deter everyone.

IMPLIED Despite numerous studies showing that distracted driving causes accidents, they keep typing.

CLEAR Despite numerous studies showing that distracted drivers cause accidents, they keep typing.

- *Match pronouns and the words they refer to.* Singular nouns and pronouns take singular pronouns; plural nouns and pronouns take plural pronouns. The most common error occurs with singular indefinite pronouns such as *anybody, anyone, everyone, nobody,* and *somebody.* We often use these words to mean "many" or "all" and then mistakenly refer to them with plural pronouns:

MISMATCHED Everyone must check in before they can vote.

MATCHED Everyone must check in before he or she can vote.

MATCHED All students must check in before they can vote.

Modifiers

A **modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that describes another word (or words) in a sentence. Confusion arises when modifiers are positioned or punctuated incorrectly.

- *Make sure that modifiers clearly modify the intended words.* Misplaced and dangling modifiers can be awkward or even unintentionally amusing:

  MISPLACED I watched as the snow swirled around my feet in amazement.

  CLEAR I watched in amazement as the snow swirled around my feet.

  DANGLING Enjoying the quiet of the forest, the crack of a hunter's rifle startled me out of my reverie.

  CLEAR Enjoying the quiet of the forest, I was startled out of my reverie by the crack of a hunter's rifle.

- *Punctuate restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers appropriately.* A modifier is *restrictive*, or essential, when it limits the word or phrase it modifies. If removing the modifier would change the fundamental meaning of the sentence, that element should not be set off with punctuation:

  RESTRICTIVE The fashion magazines *Vogue and GQ* have been accused of setting unrealistic beauty standards by altering photographs to hide models' flaws.

  A modifier is *nonrestrictive*, or nonessential, if it adds information to a sentence that would still make sense without it. Writers use commas, parentheses, or dashes to separate a nonrestrictive element from the rest of the sentence:

  NONRESTRICTIVE Fashion magazines, including *Vogue* and *GQ*, have been accused of setting unrealistic beauty standards by altering photographs to hide models' flaws.

  NONRESTRICTIVE Fashion magazines (including *Vogue* and *GQ*) have been accused of setting unrealistic beauty standards by altering photographs to hide models' flaws.

  NONRESTRICTIVE Fashion magazines—including *Vogue* and *GQ*—have been accused of setting unrealistic beauty standards by altering photographs to hide models' flaws.

Note that the same modifier might be restrictive or nonrestrictive, depending on the writer's intended meaning:

RESTRICTIVE The students who expressed optimism did well on the exam.

NONRESTRICTIVE The students, who expressed optimism, did well on the exam.

In the first sentence above, the phrase *who expressed optimism* identifies which students did well. The commas in the second sentence indicate that the writer is referring to the entire group of students; the phrase adds information about their attitudes. Both sentences are correct, but their meanings are different.

Shifts

As you edit, check that your use of pronouns and verbs is consistent. Straighten out any unnecessary shifts in person, tense, or voice.

- *Person.* Don't shift needlessly among the first person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third person (*he, she, they*):

  INCONSISTENT We were frightened, but you had to stay calm.

  CONSISTENT We were frightened, but we had to stay calm.

- *Tense.* Don't shift needlessly between the present tense and the past tense of verbs:

  INCONSISTENT The tornado siren howls so loudly it rattled the walls.

  CONSISTENT The tornado siren howled so loudly it rattled the walls.

- *Voice.* Don't shift needlessly between the active voice and the passive voice of verbs (see the next page for an explanation of voice):

  INCONSISTENT The police told us to leave our belongings behind, and we were advised to notify family members.

  CONSISTENT The police told us to leave our belongings behind, and they advised us to notify family members.

For more help avoiding shifts, see "Focus on Verbs" on page 69 and "Focus on Consistency" on page 212.

Making Sentences Clear and Effective

Clear and effective sentences convey your meaning concisely and precisely. In editing you want to ensure that readers will understand you easily, follow your ideas without difficulty, and stay interested in what you have to say.

Conciseness

In drafting, we often circle around our ideas, making various attempts to express them. As a result, sentences may use more words than necessary to make their points. To edit for conciseness, focus on the following changes:

- *Put the main meaning of the sentence in its subject and verb.* Generally, the subject should name the actor, and the verb should describe what the actor did or was. Notice the difference in these two sentences (the subjects and verbs are underlined):

  WORDY The use of calculators by students is sometimes why they fail to develop math skills.

  CONCISE Students who use calculators sometimes fail to develop math skills.

- *Prefer the active voice.* In the active voice, a verb describes the action done *by* the subject (*We grilled vegetables*), whereas in the passive voice, a verb describes the action done *to* the subject (*Vegetables were grilled*, or, adding who did the action, *Vegetables were grilled by us*). The active voice is usually more concise and more direct than the passive:

  WORDY PASSIVE Calculators were withheld from some classrooms by school administrators, and the math performance of students with and without the machines was compared.

  CONCISE ACTIVE School administrators withheld calculators from some classrooms and compared the math performance of students with and without the machines.

- *Delete repetition and padding.* Words that don't contribute to your meaning will interfere with readers' understanding and interest. Watch out for unneeded repetition or restatement, and avoid empty phrases that add no meaning:

  WORDY Students in the schools should have ample practice in math skills, skills such as long division and work with fractions.

  CONCISE Students should have ample practice in math skills, such as long division and work with fractions.

  WORDY The nature of calculators is such that they remove the drudgery from math but can also for all intents and purposes interfere with the development of important cognitive skills.

  CONCISE Calculators remove the drudgery from math but can also interfere with the development of important cognitive skills.

For additional advice on reducing wordiness, see "Focus on Conciseness" on page 304.

Emphasis

Once your sentences are as clear and concise as you can make them, you'll want to ensure that they give the appropriate emphasis to your ideas. Readers will look for the idea of a sentence in its subject and its verb, with modifiers clarifying or adding texture. You can emphasize important ideas by altering the structure of sentences. Following are the most common techniques.

- *Use subordination to de-emphasize what's less important.* Subordination places minor information in words or word groups that modify the sentence's subject and verb:

  UNEMPHATIC Computers can manipulate film and photographs, and we cannot trust these media to represent reality. [The sentence has two subject-verb structures (both underlined), and they seem equally important.]

  EMPHATIC Because computers can manipulate film and photographs, we cannot trust these media to represent reality. [*Because* makes the first subject-verb group into a modifier, de-emphasizing the cause of the change and emphasizing the effect.]

- *Use coordination to balance equally important ideas.* Coordination emphasizes the equality of ideas by joining them with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so,* or *yet*):

  UNEMPHATIC Two people may be complete strangers. A photograph can show them embracing.

  EMPHATIC Two people may be complete strangers, but a photograph can show them embracing.

- *Use the ends and beginnings of sentences to highlight ideas.* The end of a sentence is its most emphatic position, and the beginning is next most emphatic. Placing the sentence's subject and verb in one of these positions draws readers' attention to them. In these sentences the core idea is underlined:

  UNEMPHATIC With computerized images, filmmakers can entertain us, placing historical figures alongside today's actors.

  EMPHATIC Filmmakers can entertain us with computerized images that place historical figures alongside today's actors.

  MORE EMPHATIC With computerized images that place historical figures alongside today's actors, filmmakers can entertain us.

- *Use short sentences to underscore points.* A very short sentence amid longer sentences will focus readers' attention on a key point:

  UNEMPHATIC Such images of historical figures and fictional characters have a disadvantage, however, in that they blur the boundaries of reality.

  EMPHATIC Such images of historical figures and fictional characters have a disadvantage, however. They blur the boundaries of reality.

Parallelism

Parallelism is the use of similar grammatical structures for elements of similar importance, either within or among sentences:

PARALLELISM WITHIN A SENTENCE Smoking can worsen heart disease and cause lung cancer.

PARALLELISM AMONG SENTENCES Smoking has less well-known effects, too. It can cause gum disease. It can impair blood circulation. And it can reduce the body's supply of vitamins and minerals.

The second example above shows how parallelism can relate sentences to improve coherence (see pp. 35–36).

To make the elements of a sentence parallel, repeat the forms of related words, phrases, and sentences:

NONPARALLEL Harris expects dieters to give up bread, dairy, and eating meat.

PARALLEL Harris expects dieters to give up bread, dairy, and meat.

NONPARALLEL Harris emphasizes self-denial, but with Marconi's plan you can eat whatever you want in moderation.

PARALLEL Harris emphasizes self-denial, but Marconi emphasizes moderation.

NONPARALLEL If you want to lose weight quickly, try the Harris diet. You'll have more success keeping the weight off if you follow Marconi's plan.

PARALLEL If you want to lose weight quickly, choose the Harris diet. If you want to keep the weight off, choose Marconi's plan.

For more examples of editing for parallel structure, see "Focus on Parallelism" on page 244.

Variety

Variety in the structure and length of sentences helps keep readers alert and interested, but it also does more. By emphasizing important points and de-emphasizing less important points, varied sentences make your writing clearer and easier to follow.

Consider, for example, the two passages below. The first is adapted from "How Boys Become Men," an essay by Jon Katz. The second is the passage Katz actually wrote.

UNVARIED I was walking my dog last month past the playground near my house. I saw three boys encircling a fourth. They were laughing and pushing him. He was skinny and rumpled. He looked frightened. One boy knelt behind him. Another pushed him from the front. The trick was familiar to any former boy. The victim fell backward.

VARIED Last month, walking my dog past the playground near my house, I saw three boys encircling a fourth, laughing and pushing him. He was skinny and rumpled, and he looked frightened. One boy knelt behind him while another pushed him from the front, a trick familiar to any former boy. He fell backward.

Katz's actual sentences work much better to hold and direct our attention because he uses several techniques to achieve variety:

- *Vary the lengths of sentences.* The nine sentences in the unvaried adaptation range from three to thirteen words. Katz's four sentences range from three to twenty-two words, with the long first sentence setting the scene and the short final sentence creating a climax.

- *Vary the beginnings of sentences.* Every sentence in the unvaried adaptation begins with its subject (*I, I, They, He, He, One boy, Another, The trick, The victim*). Katz, in contrast, begins the first sentence with a transition and a modifier (*Last month, walking my dog past the playground near my house . . .*).
- *Vary the structure of sentences.* The sentences in the unvaried adaptation are all similar in structure, marching like soldiers down the page and making it difficult to pick out the important events of the story. Katz's version emphasizes the important events by making them the subjects and verbs of the sentences, turning the other information into modifying phrases and clauses.

For more strategies and examples, see "Focus on Sentence Variety" on page 124.

Choosing the Best Words

The words you choose can have a dramatic effect on how readers understand your meaning, perceive your attitude, and respond to your thesis.

▶ Denotations and Connotations

The **denotation** of a word is its dictionary meaning, the literal sense without emotional overtones. A **connotation** is an emotional association the word produces in readers. Using incorrect or inappropriate words will confuse or annoy readers.

Using a word with the wrong denotation muddies meaning. Be especially careful to distinguish between words with similar sounds but different meanings, such as *to/too/two, their/there/they're, it's/its,* and *lose/loose,* and between words with related but distinct meanings, such as *reward/award* and *famous/infamous.* Keeping a list of the new words you acquire will help you build your vocabulary and improve your spelling.

Using words with strong connotations can shape readers' responses to your ideas. For example, consider the distinctions among *feeling, enthusiasm, passion,* and *mania.* Describing a group's *enthusiasm* for its cause is quite different from describing its *mania*: the latter connotes much more intensity, even irrationality. If your aim is to imply that the group's enthusiasm is excessive, and you think your readers will respond well to that characterization, then *mania* may be the appropriate word. But words can backfire if they spark inappropriate associations in readers.

Spell checkers and auto-correct functions can't catch words that are spelled correctly but used incorrectly. Consult a dictionary whenever you are unsure of a word's spelling or meaning. For connotations, you'll find a wide range of choices in a thesaurus, which lists words with similar meanings. A thesaurus doesn't provide definitions, however, so you'll need to check unfamiliar words in a dictionary.

▶ Concrete and Specific Language

Clear, exact writing balances abstract and general words, which provide outlines of ideas and things, with concrete and specific words, which limit and sharpen.

- **Abstract words** name ideas, qualities, attitudes, or states that we cannot perceive with our senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste: *liberty, hate, anxious.* **Concrete words,** in contrast, name objects, persons, places, or states that we can perceive with our senses: *toaster, red-faced, screeching, smoky.*
- **General words** name groups: *building, color, clothes.* **Specific words** name particular members of a group: *courthouse, purple, boot-cut jeans.*

You need abstract and general words for broad statements that set the course for your writing, expressing concepts or referring to entire groups. But you also need concrete and specific words to make your meaning precise and vivid by appealing to readers' senses and experiences:

> VAGUE The pollution was apparent in the odor and color of the small stream.
>
> EXACT The stagnant stream smelled like rotten eggs and ran the greenish color of coffee with nonfat milk.

Concrete and specific language may seem essential only in descriptions like that of the polluted stream, but it is equally crucial in any other kind of writing. Readers can't be expected to understand or agree with general statements unless they know what evidence the statements are based on. The evidence is in the details, and the details are in concrete and specific words. (See also "Focus on Concrete and Specific Language" on p. 97.)

▶ Figures of Speech

You can make your writing concrete and specific, even lively and forceful, with **figures of speech**, expressions that imply meanings beyond or different from their literal meanings. Here are some of the most common figures:

- A **simile** compares two unlike things with the use of *like* or *as*: *The car spun around like a top. Coins as bright as sunshine lay glinting in the chest.*
- A **metaphor** also compares two unlike things, but more subtly, equating them without *like* or *as*: *The words shattered my fragile self-esteem. The laboratory was her prison, the beakers and test tubes her guards.*
- **Personification** is a simile or metaphor that attributes human qualities or powers to things or abstractions: *The breeze sighed and whispered in the grasses. The city squeezed me tightly at first but then relaxed its grip.*
- **Hyperbole** is a deliberate overstatement or exaggeration: *The dentist filled the tooth with a bracelet's worth of silver. The children's noise shook the rafters.*

By briefly translating experiences and qualities into vividly concrete images, figures of speech can be economical and powerful when used sparingly. Be careful not to combine them into confusing or absurd images, such as *The soccer players danced around the field like bulls ready for a fight.*

In trying for figures of speech, we sometimes resort to **clichés**, worn phrases that have lost their power: *ripe old age, hour of need, heavy as lead, thin as a rail, goes on forever.* If you have trouble recognizing clichés in your writing, be suspicious of any expression you have heard or read before. When you do find a cliché, cure it by substituting plain language (for instance, *seems endless* for *goes on forever*) or by substituting a fresh figure of speech (*thin as a sapling* for *thin as a rail*).

Using an Editing Checklist

The checklist on the opposite page summarizes the editing advice given in this chapter and adds a few other technical concerns. Some of the items will be more relevant for your writing than others: you may have little difficulty with variety in sentences, but may worry that your language is too general. Concentrate your editing efforts where they're needed most, and then survey your draft to check for other problems.

CHECKLIST FOR EDITING

- *Where do sentences need editing for grammar and punctuation*—so that, for instance, sentences are complete; subjects and verbs agree; pronouns are used effectively; modifiers make sense; commas, colons, and semicolons are used appropriately; and tense is consistent?
- *Is each sentence as concise as it can be?*
- *How well have you used sentence structure, variety, parallelism, and other techniques to emphasize ideas and hold readers' interest?*
- *Have you used the right words?* Where can you clarify meaning with concrete and specific words or with figures of speech?
- *Where might spelling be a problem?* Look up any word you're not absolutely sure of. (You'll still have to proofread a spell-checked paper; spell checkers don't catch everything.)

Nicole Lang's Editing and Final Draft

The following paragraph comes from the edited draft of Nicole Lang's "Foundations." Below that, Lang's full final draft appears with notes in the margins highlighting its thesis, structure, and uses of the methods of development. If you compare the final version with the first draft on pages 29–30, you'll see clearly how Lang's revising and editing transformed the essay from a rough exploration of ideas to a refined, and convincing, essay.

EDITED PARAGRAPH

Students
~~These~~ in more traditional schools need to keep ~~there~~ their eye on the real
typical college graduate will start out
world, too. The ~~average student will graduate~~ owing nearly $30,000 in ~~student~~
Olsen While it is
loans (~~source~~). ~~Its~~ important to find a career path that feels meaningful
just as important
and fulfilling. ~~But~~ it is ~~also necessary~~ to earn an income that will outweigh
We therefore
the cost of higher education. ~~This means we~~ need to focus ~~our time and~~
~~effort~~ on academic programs that will directly benefit our job prospects
help us most of us cannot
and ~~put us in a position to~~ repay our debts. With limited resources, ~~not~~
into which we —at
~~everyone can~~ afford shacks ~~they~~ can retreat ~~into. At~~ least not yet.

FINAL DRAFT

Nicole Lang
Professor Binari
English 100A
19 September 2014

Foundations

Edward P. Jones, in "Shacks," reflects on his first semester of college. He recalls writing letters to his high school crush and in doing so discovering a sense of purpose, a "shack," that helped him get through a difficult time of adjustment. But when Jones wonders at our ability to find structure when "so much is at stake" (10), I can't help but think about what is at stake for college students today. Unlike Jones, not everyone has the luxury to indulge in three months of emotional growth, or to look for talents they may not even know they have. For those who struggle just to pay for the opportunity, a college education has to serve the more concrete purpose of preparing for employment.

Brief summary of Jones's essay

Author's name in text and page number in parentheses refer to "Works Cited" at end of paper

Introduction establishes point of contention with Jones

Thesis statement

Jones seems to think of college as an extension of high school—a place to grow up, if just a little (11). That may be true for some people. But for many students, adulthood is not something that can be put off. For example, my cousin Robert is twenty-nine years old and has a young child and a job that barely pays the bills. His shack is his son. He takes night classes at a community college so he can qualify for a better position, and he does not have time to dream about "some marvelous future" (10). Instead, he spends his time actively constructing a better life for himself and his family.

Classification: types of college students

Example of adult student

My cousin is not unusual. A growing number of college students are adults over twenty-five. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and enroll for a number of reasons, but they all understand the demands of a tough job market in a down economy. They also understand that getting a certificate or a degree will give them the skills they need for particular jobs and prove to employers that they can work independently. Such vocational training is important and deserves respect.

Classification: types of college students

Cause-and-effect analysis: why adult students go to college

Students in more traditional schools need to keep their eyes on the real world, too. The typical college graduate will start out owing nearly $30,000 in loans (Olsen). While it is important to find a career path that feels meaningful and fulfilling, it is just as important to earn an income that will outweigh the cost of higher education. We therefore need to focus on academic programs that will directly benefit our job prospects and help us repay our debts. With limited resources, most of us cannot afford shacks into which we can retreat—at least not yet.

Classification: types of college students

Name in parentheses identifies source of supporting point

Cause-and-effect analysis: why students need to consider future income

Jones makes a good point that a successful life depends on some kind of structure. To be truly sturdy, however, any structure requires a solid foundation. That's what college provides. Although we should certainly hope to discover ourselves and our hidden talents while we're here, for financially burdened students the realities of higher education all come down to time and money. We have to be practical as we build on our dreams.

Conclusion extends Jones's metaphor and restates Lang's thesis