Dorthea Lange’s famous Great Depression-era photograph, *Migrant Mother.*
In March 1936, while the Great Depression still gripped the nation, documentary photographer Dorthea Lange was driving along a quiet California road when she passed a sign that said, “Pea Picker’s Camp.” Lange already had finished a project for the federal Resettlement Administration that focused on migrant families devastated by the depression, but twenty miles after passing the sign she turned her car around to get just a few more photos. At the camp, Lange was “drawn like a magnet” to a mother and her children. Lange later remembered that she did “not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her,”

. . . but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.

Lange’s last-minute decision to return to take a few more pictures proved opportune. Her image, “Migrant Mother,” is perhaps the most famous twentieth century American documentary photograph, and it remains among the most requested picture in the Library of Congress archive.

In the last chapter, we discussed the correlation between textual and visual literacy. A photograph, like an essay, involves composition and visual grammar. In Lange’s photograph of the migrant mother, for example, she consciously arranged certain visual elements to create an emotional effect. Like writing, a good photograph is full of information, too. There are exactly three children in this picture surrounding Florence Thompson, and they are wearing similar rough
fabric clothing. None faces the camera. Florence’s gaze seems fixed on some distant place, her mouth is set, and her brow seems furrowed. All of these details work together to say more than they say individually, to tell a story not just about the impact of the Great Depression but about motherhood and family.

You can develop your own interpretation of “Migrant Mother” using dialectical thinking, perhaps beginning by openly exploring how the picture connects with your own experiences and observations. This might lead you to focus on a “reading” of the photograph that emphasizes the anxieties of mothering or the shame of poverty in America. But there are ways to make the inquiry process a bit more methodological, ways that you can deliberately shift your perspective to see a subject freshly. How? Ask the right questions.

Years ago, I spent an afternoon taking photographs of an old wagon on a rolling New Hampshire hill. I got up early on a September morning hoping to take advantage of the slanting light and the shreds of mist that hung on the hayfield. I resolved to take an entire roll of the wagon, and I literally circled it, taking shot after shot. By the fourth of fifth shot, I started to see the wagon in ways I’d never seen it. I saw how the beads of dew covered the bleached wood of the wagon’s wheel. I saw how the ironwork of the driver’s bench created a shadow on the grass that was a tangle of geometric shapes.

What I’m describing is the process of revision. But the anecdote also comes to mind now because it illustrates how different questions will shift your gaze on a topic. They help you circle the wagon, changing your angle and revealing certain aspects of the subject and not others. Behind each question is a different perspective.

In this chapter, I’ll suggest four ways of seeing, each prompted by a different opening question. Combined with dialectical thinking, these stances—exploring, explaining, evaluating, and reflecting—are a foundation of inquiry-based learning that will help you with every assignment in this book, and in any situation in which you want to figure out what you think. We’ll apply these ways of seeing to a range of texts, both written and visual, and I hope you’ll find yourself circling the wagon in much the same way I did years ago.

**OPENING QUESTIONS FOR INQUIRY**

All inquiry begins with questions. Indeed, the **opening questions** we ask largely determine our response to a subject. These questions shape the stance we take toward both the writing process and the reading process. These opening questions are situational. For example, in writing they depend on our particular subject, on who we’re writing for, and our purposes at any given moment in the process. Recall the rhetorical triangle from
Chapter 1: The rhetorical choices we make are informed by the questions we ask in response to the writing situation. While opening questions will vary from one writing situation to the next, we can group them into categories that conform to four different ways of inquiring into a subject, which are:

1. **Exploration:** This way of inquiring is suited to the personal investigation of a subject. When we explore we are receptive to a subject much like a child is to new experiences. We are curious and open to new ways of seeing; in fact, when we explore we expect to learn and discover things about ourselves and the subject. Questions for exploration include:
   
   • What does this mean to me, or how do I think or feel about it?
   • What do I notice first? And then what? And then?
   • What interests me most about this? What additional questions does it raise?
   • How do my own personal knowledge and experiences affect the way I feel and what I see?

2. **Explanation:** This way of inquiring is designed to help describe, define, or classify a subject. We explain as an effort to clarify things, perhaps first for ourselves and then for others. If exploration opens things up, explanation helps nail things down so we can start to make sense of them. Questions for explanation include:
   
   • How does this work? Why does it work? How does this clarify things?
   • What does it look like?
   • How does it compare to something else?
   • What do I understand this to be saying?

3. **Evaluation:** This way of inquiring seeks to make and support an argument, a claim, or a position about a subject. Evaluation always involves a judgment of some sort—this is good or bad, useful or useless, relevant or irrelevant, or somewhere in between. It also encourages an examination of the evidence, sometimes to help form a judgment or to make a judgment convincing. Questions for evaluation include:
   
   • What’s my take on this?
   • Do I see this the way most other people do?
   • All things considered, what’s most convincing here? What’s least convincing?
   • What do I see that supports what I believe? What do I see that complicates or contradicts what I believe?
CHAPTER 3 ▪ Ways of Inquiring

4. **Reflection:** This way of inquiring is focused not on the subject, but rather on the writer/reader and the process through which she engages her subject. Reflection demands a kind of self-awareness most of us aren’t used to because it focuses on our *methods of thought* as well as our actions. Questions for reflection include:

- What do I notice about how I think about or do this?
- How do I compare how I approach this task with how I approach another one?
- What are the patterns of thinking or doing that I usually follow when I do this? Did those patterns change at all?
- How do I feel about my performance?

Each of these four ways of inquiring compels writers to take a different stance toward a subject, be it a text, a memory, an observation, a conversation, a photograph, or another process. Each shapes how writers see a subject (or themselves), much like taking a series of different photographs of the wagon on the hill that was mentioned earlier. Imagine, for example, that you’re writing an essay on a proposed student tuition hike at your school. If you begin the inquiry process by asking, “What do I think about a tuition hike?” (exploration) then you’ll read the university’s proposal much differently than if you start by asking, “What’s least convincing?” (evaluation) about the university’s proposal. The questions you ask fundamentally shift your ways of seeing.

**EXPLORATION**

When we ask questions of exploration, our engagement with subject is personal: *How do I feel about this? What does it mean to me? What do I think?* Through these questions, the writer can openly investigate her feelings and thoughts and find a personal point of attachment to the subject. This way of inquiring is particularly useful when you’re writing on something about which you’re uncertain. It can help you suspend judgment even when doing so runs counter to your instincts. You think, for example, that an assigned reading is boring. Maybe so, but by asking questions of exploration you might break through this initial reaction and discover something surprising about the reading that holds your interest.

This way of inquiring isn’t just for fastwriting or journal work. Exploration can also inform much more publicly oriented inquiry into a subject. Historically, the personal essay is a genre that relies heavily on exploration (see Chapter 4, “Writing a Personal Essay”). Writers of personal essays constantly take measure of their emotional relationship with their subjects, much the way we do when we’re writing for ourselves in our journals. This public performance of the inquiring *I* has an interesting effect.
on readers—we feel a sense of intimacy with the writer that is often absent in other writing genres. Ironically, questions that would seem to free us from concern for our audience can also wind up making our writing more accessible to that audience.

When should you try exploration as a way of inquiring? This is not easy to sum up because writing situations vary so greatly, but it helps to think rhetorically. We’ve already mentioned one element of the rhetorical triangle—the writer—that is very important. The other two elements of the triangle, audience and the subject or text will also shape our decision. In many ways, our purpose in pursuing an investigation into a subject is the most decisive factor of all. There are other less obvious factors to consider, too, including how much time the writer has for the task, the amount of expertise or knowledge required to write well on the subject, and the form—or genre—in which the writer must express himself. Taken together, all of the above factors will shape our decision about if and to what extent we use this way of inquiring. Let’s look closer at how this works.

1. The Writer:
   • Whenever we write, we decide who we want to be. I know this sounds odd, because aren’t you always the same person when you write? Not really. Often unconsciously, we create a persona in writing, a certain self that we hope will be perceived a certain way by readers. More than any other way of inquiring, exploration can free you from worrying about how you will be perceived, which often leads to refreshing honesty about what you think and feel.

2. Audience:
   • Exploration is often most productive when writers write for themselves, with no one looking over their shoulders.
   • On the other hand, when exploration is made public it is a way of inquiring that is genuinely conversational—writers and readers collaborate, in a way, in the experience of figuring something out. In situations where the writer craves this kind of intimacy with real or imagined readers, exploration can be attractive.

3. Purpose:
   • Exploration can be most useful when you don’t know your purpose in writing about something, but would like to discover it. It’s a way of inquiring that most welcomes the disruption of questions, beginning with What do I think and feel about this? And Is this really true?

4. Time:
   • This way of inquiring takes time; in fact, some writers might consider it an incredibly inefficient way to write, considering all the time spent figuring things out in a journal or on the page. But all of this exploration can pay off in a big way: you can discover a
topic you might not have found if you had not written your way to it. Even more important, you might discover what you didn't know you knew.

• Exploration is not a way of inquiring that you will use very much if tight deadlines are involved. You wouldn’t use it, for instance, when confronted with a thirty-minute essay exam because there wouldn’t be much time to discover what you want to say.

5. Expertise:

• Exploring can yield the most surprises when you don’t know what you think or feel about your topic. Because it is an open-ended way of inquiring, there’s plenty of room to circle a subject and see it from many perspectives. This may give you a richer understanding of your topic than when, for example, you quickly choose a claim to argue or a thesis to explain.

• Even topics that you think you know a lot about can yield more through exploration, if this way of inquiring helps you find the right questions to ask.

6. Genre:

• This way of inquiring can be used to write in any genre, but it is most encouraged—and expected—in the personal essay. It can also be useful in the research essay.

• Invention strategies like fastwriting always involve exploration. This way of inquiring also informs sketches and early drafts.

EXERCISE 3.1

Exploring “Migrant Mother”

STEP ONE: Study Dorthea Lange’s photograph at the front of this chapter. Pay attention to how it makes you feel, but try to avoid rushing to judgment about how you might interpret the image; that is, hold off deciding

**Exploration**

**The Writer:** Writes most honestly

**Audience:** Concern is usually low

**Purpose:** To discover

**Time:** Relatively time-consuming

**Expertise:** Not necessarily required

**Genre:** Personal essays, sometimes research essays, journal writing, sketches, and early discovery drafts
what seems to be the dominant feeling it evokes in you, or what the photograph says to you.

**STEP TWO:** In your journal, explore your reactions to this photograph through a fastwrite. Your writing should be open-ended—but avoid making up a story about the woman and her children. For now, at least, focus your fastwrite on what you see, feel, and think about the image.

**Journal Prompts**

If you need a prompt, choose one of the options below:

- **Narrative of thought:** When I first look at the picture, I feel or think __________. And then __________. And then __________. And then . . . and then . . . And now?

- **Telling details:** Quickly make a list of at least five details from the image that strike you. Choose one to begin with and write quickly about why that detail seems to stand out, what it makes you think and feel, and how it might hint about the meaning of the whole photograph for you. Whenever that writing stalls, choose another detail from your list and use it as a prompt in a similar way.

**STEP THREE:** After fastwriting, reread what you’ve written. Underline sentences or passages in your writing that say or imply what you think or feel Lange’s photograph is about. Where do you come closest to naming the dominant impression it creates, or what it seems to say to you? In other words, where did you shift from creative to critical thinking? Discuss what you discovered in class. If you were to write a one or two sentence caption for the photograph, what would you write?

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**ONE STUDENT’S RESPONSE**

**LANA’S JOURNAL**

**EXERCISE 3.1**

**STEP ONE**

**Narrative of thought:** When I first look at the picture I feel or think that I know this person—that I am sometimes this person. I can feel the pressure of having children depending upon you to provide them with the basic needs of life. I find it hard to imagine that this woman is 32. I feel that she is beautiful—there is a dignity that surrounds her rather than despair over her situation. . . .

**Telling details:**

1. the neck of the little girl on the right
2. the way the woman’s hand is pulling on her face
3. the children are looking away
4. the monochromatic color of the clothes
5. the woman isn’t looking at the camera

The most telling detail for me is the little girl on the right . . . the back of her neck and messed up hair remind me of the way Lucy looks when she first wakes up in the morning. I like how the children are looking away as if the mother is shielding them from the camera or maybe even the concrete reality of their lives. Overall, all of my feelings towards this photo relate to my own experiences as a mom and the feelings I have towards my life and my children. I get the feeling that this woman is strong and independent and proud of her efforts to provide . . .

STEP TWO
The main feeling communicated by Lange’s photograph “Migrant Mother” is the mother’s desire to protect her children and preserve her dignity and self-respect in spite of her physical situation. The position of her children in the photograph—looking away from the camera, bodies positioned to fit like puzzle pieces with the mother’s body—demonstrate the mother’s desire to protect her children from the harsh realities of their life . . .

EXPLANATION
We explain things all the time. This is something parents are acutely aware of, especially if they have a kid like my daughter Julia.

“Who are the Israelis?” she asks as we listen to National Public Radio on the way to school, “and why are they always talking about them?”

“Who is talking about them?”

“The people on the radio,” she says. “They are always talking about the Israelis and the Palestinians.”

How do I begin to explain a conflict that has its roots in several thousand years of history, one complicated by religious differences and political alliances that seem to defy resolution? What Julia knows seems much simpler: a Palestinian family in Gaza was killed by Israeli soldiers who were retaliating for a suicide attack in Jerusalem that killed thirteen. Do I begin by explaining Moses’ exodus from Egypt and the Jews’ historic claims to the Holy Land or the Muslim’s conquest of the region in the seventh century? Or do I explain the creation of the Israeli state following World War II and the demise of Palestine? What I realize, as Julia impatiently waits for me to say something, is that I know much less than I thought I knew about the history of this conflict.

As this example suggests, we tend to use explanation with an audience in mind. But by explaining things to ourselves we can learn a lot, too,
because this way of inquiring exposes gaps in our knowledge. Clearly, in attempting to explain the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians to my daughter I was forced to confront the limits of my own knowledge on the subject.

A common technique in psychotherapy is something called “say back.” In couples counseling, for example, one partner may be required to listen carefully to his or her spouse talk, and then say back what he or she heard. The method is great for helping couples really listen to and understand each other, something that is ordinarily difficult to do amid life's daily distractions. The explanatory power of say back is much like the power of summarizing or paraphrasing something you’ve read or experienced. By challenging writers to use their own words, summarizing and paraphrasing allow writers to take possession of the information, to make it their own by articulating their understanding of the information in their own words. Summarizing and paraphrasing can also expose the gaps in our knowledge. You thought you understood a subject, but upon reading over your summary or paraphrase of the subject, you now aren’t so sure that’s the case. Is there another way to understand the subject so you can explain it better? Have you missed something you need to know in order to understand the subject?

This way of inquiring involves much more than simply reporting information. It’s a way of clarifying thought, enhancing understanding, making useful comparisons, and exposing gaps. For me, trying to explain the Middle East conflict to Julia and writing this book were two experiences that involved discoveries that made them much more than mere recitations of fact and detail.

Practical factors that can influence our decision to use this way of inquiring include the following:

1. **The Writer:**
   - How well do you really understand a subject you’re reading or writing about? Explaining things to yourself, or to an audience, will expose gaps in your knowledge.
   - Writers who take care to clarify their subjects—making useful comparisons, offering succinct summaries and definitions, and so on—earn the gratitude of their readers. These writers create a persona in the work that is more persuasive because they seem to really want their readers to understand their topic.

2. **Audience:**
   - Explanation is usually directed at an audience, the real or imagined readers with whom writers want to share their understanding of a subject. To effectively communicate their understanding to an audience, writers need to be able to see their subject from the audience’s perspective.
• Writers can, however, also be an audience for their own explanations. We explain things to ourselves to get a better grasp of information.

3. Purpose:
• The aim of explanation is to inform, and thus it drives all attempts to describe, define, compare, and classify subjects.
• Explanation can be used to find gaps in the writer’s knowledge or to increase his understanding.
• Explanation can also provide a useful context for understanding the writer’s questions, concerns, or ideas.

4. Time:
• Explanation requires time. Describing a situation completely is not an activity that can be rushed.
• Explanation tends to proceed more rapidly when conducted for the sake of the writer alone and not an audience.

5. Expertise:
• Explanation requires knowledge about a subject. The writer must know the subject well enough or must conduct research to gain sufficient knowledge to explain the subject. Since prior knowledge is rarely complete, research is often necessary to fill gaps in the writer’s knowledge.
• Explanation also can help a writer test her understanding of something new.

6. Genres:
• Explanation is an element in all genres of writing.
• Explanation plays a prominent role in argument, as any effort to support a claim requires the explanation of evidence.
• Two common note-taking techniques—summarizing and paraphrasing—embody this way of inquiring.
EXERCISE 3.2

Explaining a Marketing Strategy

For obvious reasons, advertisers are some of the most rhetorically savvy people around. They have something to sell, and in order to do it they carefully tailor their messages to certain audiences. But even before they figure out what to say, they decide on the medium in which to say it. For example, if an advertiser is after men between the ages of twenty-one and forty, then *Esquire* magazine might be the choice. If an advertiser is after women in a similar age group, then *Cosmopolitan* might be a good choice.

The two ads that follow on pages 76 and 77 promote quite different products. Try to use explaining as a way of inquiring to clarify the marketing strategy in each ad.

**STEP ONE:** Open your journal to blank opposing pages. On the left page, make a fast list that describes, in order, the details your eyes take in as you look at each advertisement: What do you notice first? Then what? Then what? And then? Be as specific as possible; that is, rather than saying “the man’s arm,” note “the sculpted biceps in the man’s left arm.”

**STEP TWO:** Based on what your eyes are drawn to in each ad, what *story* does each ad seem to be telling to its intended audience? On the right page of your journal, tell those stories in your own words, and then explain why you think the story the ad seems to be telling would (or would not) succeed in selling its product to its intended audience.

**STEP THREE:** In small groups, compare the two ads and discuss which of the two ads you think is the more effective and why.

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**One Student’s Response**

**DAVID’S JOURNAL**

**EXERCISE 3.2**

**STEP ONE:**

A list of things I notice in the Guess ad:

- Man’s unbuttoned white shirt
- Black tie is unkempt
- Man’s hair like Jeff Bridges
- White boots with pointed tips
- Both women extremely skinny

**STEP TWO:**

If you’re a man and wear Guess clothes, then you’ll feel young and sexy, and won’t feel the need to get dressed up. It’s the casual style that will attract women—even more than one at the same time!—and they won’t mind being much better dressed than you. Let it all hang out! She won’t mind, and either will she!
**STEP ONE:**
- Kissing woman on left, woman on right unbothered, smiling
- Dirty street
- Emerging from restaurant?
- Hairless chest

**STEP TWO:**
EVALUATION

To evaluate something is to judge it or to form an opinion about it. Evaluating things—restaurants, the quality of play in the NBA, the religious motives of terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden—is something we all do naturally. These evaluations tend to lead us to do and say certain things to support our opinions or to make our claims convincing, first to ourselves and then to others. Indeed, evaluation is really the driving force behind argument.
As a way of inquiring, evaluation shares much with exploration. Both hinge on the writer’s emotional response to a subject. Exploration, however, is much more open-ended in its approach, more receptive to doubt and uncertainty about the subject. Evaluation, on the other hand, is focused exclusively on making and supporting a judgment about the subject. In sum, you use exploration when your purpose is to discover and you use evaluation when your purpose is to prove, although both ways of inquiring can be used together to great effect.

While we constantly evaluate things for ourselves, we usually reserve written evaluation for an audience. Our concern, then, is to convince others to feel the same way we do about the subject. To do so, we usually have to clarify and to elaborate on our thinking.

Indeed, since all evaluation stems from what are essentially subjective value judgments, a tension always exists between our desire to prove our point and our need or willingness to learn more about the subject. Most, if not all issues worth arguing about are complex. In learning more about them, we can actually make it harder to prove our point. We might even be compelled to change our minds about the subject. This may be a good thing in terms of fostering a deeper understanding of the world, but it’s bound to slow down the writing process. You may not have the time required to fully explore the complexities of a subject. Charged with evaluating the impact of the war in Afghanistan on the U.S. relationship with Uzbekistan or the meaning of the water imagery in Kate Chopin’s story “The Awakening,” you might feel compelled to come up with an assertion you can prove right away. Will you ignore evidence that doesn’t support your claim? Will you allow the evidence to shape your understanding? Will you use it only to confirm your claim?

When used as a way of inquiring, evaluation should never be used merely to support a claim. Evaluation involves making judgments and testing them against the evidence. The discoveries that result should shape the claims you make. Evaluation, then, is essentially a form of dialectical thinking.

What factors will inform our decision to use this way of inquiring?

1. **The Writer:**
   - When someone makes a judgment we disagree with—“Today’s college students are more interested in being entertained than in learning”—we immediately evaluate the speaker. Is this someone who seems reasonable or fair-minded? Someone we can trust? Someone who knows what she’s talking about? Writers who make judgments are keenly aware of their audience, and present a persona in their writing that is most likely to have a positive impact.

2. **Audience:**
   - Evaluation usually is directed at an audience, although the work of arriving at a judgment may be done backstage, in a journal, or early discovery draft.
• An important way to analyze an audience is to ask yourself, “Is this audience already inclined to agree with my judgment or disagree with it? Might they have no opinion?” How you answer these questions will influence what you say and how you say it.

3. Purpose:
• The aim of evaluation is to prove. Use this way of inquiring to make and support claims.
• Asking yourself evaluation questions is also a great way to shift from creative to critical thinking at any point in the process when you need to decide what you’re trying to say about something.

4. Time:
• The time required for evaluation is entirely a function of the subject in question and the depth of inquiry. If the subject is simple and the depth relatively shallow, then evaluation can be quick. If the subject is complex and the scrutiny deep, then evaluation can take some time. Of course, the deeper the inquiry, the richer and more insightful the evaluation will be.
• Combining exploration and evaluation is a potent way to discover what you think, but can be time-consuming.

5. Expertise:
• Evidence, either from prior knowledge or research, is needed to support one’s claim. The stronger the evidence, the stronger the judgment. The weaker the evidence, the weaker the judgment.
• Again, the amount of information needed will be a function of the subject and the depth of the inquiry.
• In some cases, you may begin with little expertise, only a desire to discover what you think. Combine open-ended inquiry such as exploration and move to more focused evaluation questions, from creative to critical.

6. Genre:
• Evaluation is required in most genres, particularly academic genres. Indeed, most of your writing in college will involve evaluation of some kind or another.
• You will use evaluation in an argument, a proposal, a review, a critical essay, and a research essay, which are discussed in later chapters. While you must use evaluation in these genres, you will also employ other ways of inquiring in them, too.
• Evaluation is a prerequisite to argumentative writing.
CHAPTER 3 ▪ Ways of Inquiring

Evaluation

The Writer: A calculated presence
Audience: Concern for is high
Purpose: To prove
Time: Function of subject and depth of inquiry
Expertise: Generally, the higher the better
Genres: Most academic genres

E X E R C I S E  3 . 3

Evaluating “Generation X Goes to College”

Evaluate the excerpt below from Peter Sacks’s book, Generation X Goes to College. Sacks, a journalism teacher at an unnamed college, narrates his experiences as a first-time instructor and comes to some sobering conclusions about college students. Although his focus is on Generation X, a group that has since passed on to the job market, I hear exactly the same complaints about this generation of college students. They want to be entertained. They are lazy. They can “dish it out” but “can’t take it.” How would you judge Sacks’s claims?

STEP ONE: Carefully read the excerpt, and on the left page of your notebook jot down quotations that you find provocative, puzzling, truthful, or doubtful. Write down at least three quotations.

STEP TWO: On the opposing page of your notebook, respond in a fast-write to one or more of the quotations you collected. In this step, however, first play the believing game; that is, try to see things the way Sacks sees them for five minutes. What do you agree with? What would you concede might be true? What seems his strongest argument, or his most believable evidence? How does what he say connect with your own experiences and observations?

STEP THREE: Now play the doubting game. On the right page of your journal, continue your fastwriting on the excerpts you selected, but this time take a critical stance. What does Sacks fail to understand? What does Sacks fail to consider? How do your own experiences and observations challenge his judgments?

STEP FOUR: Reread the excerpt and your journal work. Craft a 200-word response to Sacks’s views of college students. What is your own take on students and what is your evaluation of his claims?
from GENERATION X GOES TO COLLEGE
Peter Sacks

I would encounter this look and The Attitude often. It was a look of utter disengagement. At first, I was confused and bewildered by it and thought there must be something terribly wrong with me and the way I taught. But even after I began to strategically adapt to my situation, I would continue to get Those Looks accompanied by The Attitude. And I eventually would conclude that I was a good teacher, that it wasn’t me who was the problem but a culture of young people who were born and bred to sit back and enjoy the spectacle that engulfed them. They seemed to resent that I obviously couldn’t measure up to the standards for amusement that they learned on Sesame Street in their formative years, standards later reinforced by Beverly Hills 90210, Cosmopolitan, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam. What’s more, they were conditioned by an overly nurturing, hand-holding educational system not to take responsibility for their own actions. But until I began to accurately assess my new environment, I often reacted with a visible irritation to such scenes as bored guys with backwards baseball caps. I would learn that this was a classic case of people who could dish it out, but who couldn’t take it; and the trouble for me was that these young people collectively held a great deal of power in this place, a rather key point that I didn’t fully comprehend at first. Until I understood this, my relationship with some of my classes developed at times into all out war.

ONE STUDENT’S RESPONSE

MARGARET’S JOURNAL

EXERCISE 3.3

STEP ONE: The Believing Game

Remember that movie “The Burbs,” starring Corey Feldman, among others? His character was particularly amusing, and significant for this discussion, because rather than watching cable, he found his neighborhood drama so fascinating that he invited friends over to watch the spectacle. I remember my dad saying something like, “The TV generation—everything is entertainment to them!” At one point in the film, when all mayhem is breaking loose, the police are showing up, and Tom Hanks and his pals have burned down their serial killer neighbor’s home, Feldman erupts with glee and shouts, “The Pizza Dude is here!” I thought of him while reading this essay, because my generation is pretty entertainment oriented. Maybe video games and unlimited TV have turned us all into passive morons . . .
CHAPTER 3  ■  Ways of Inquiring

STEP TWO: Doubting Game

Okay, give me a break . . . this man is convinced that he is a fabulous teacher, yet many of his classes have evolved into an “all out war?” One has to wonder what his definition of a good teacher is, then. He comes off like a whiny, overly sensitive person who after discovering that he is an ineffective teacher chooses to blame it on his students rather than consider that he might be a crucial part of the problem. He never discussed how he tried to reach his students or whether he altered his teaching methods, besides compromising his high standards. I have had plenty of demanding teachers in college, and while many students bitch and moan about the workload and the difficulty, I have found that a majority of students thrive on high expectations . . . For this reason I seriously doubt his claim that he is a good teacher.

REFLECTION

Some of you may remember the television program The Wonder Years. Set in the turbulent 1960s, the show offered a glimpse of a boy and his middle-class family navigating the cultural upheavals of the time as well as the ordinary challenges of growing up. What was interesting about the show, though, was its narration. While viewers watched the boy, Kevin, deal with his family and friends in a changing society, the voice of a much older Kevin reflected on the meaning of those relationships and events, providing perspective that was unavailable to the boy while he was actually experiencing them.

As a way of inquiring, reflection is a lot like playing the part of the adult Kevin. Through reflection it is possible to increase the learning and self-knowledge we get from writing by looking back on the experience of writing. This means finding the right distance from which to see what’s not necessarily apparent in the moments of engagement. It also means learning to ask the questions that help us to see not just what we’ve written or what it means, but how we’ve done the writing and how we might be able to do it better. You’ve already had a fair amount of practice with this in The Curious Writer as you’ve reflected on the processes you used to complete the exercises and assignments. Indeed, one of the book’s central claims is that only by reflecting on your process can you control it.

This way of inquiring may not yet come naturally to you. Reflection, in some ways, seems quite different from exploration, explanation, and evaluation. The object of reflection is not what you’re writing or reading about, but how you are writing and reading about the subject. This way of inquiring requires us to witness and report on ourselves. Reflection is a form of self-assessment. By employing it, we can learn to identify and overcome our writing challenges. What problems do you have in this writing situation? What might be some of the ways you could solve them? What’s working? What’s not? What’s typical about your process? What’s unique about your process in this situation?

All of these questions force you backward, away from the immediate demands of the writing task, and encourage you to see how you write and
think. Remember writing is thinking. The payoff for reflecting is much more than figuring out when to resort to fastwriting or how to revise. It’s discovering your patterns of thought and how they can be extended or changed to let you write with more insight.

Factors that influence this way of inquiring include:

1. **The Writer:**
   - The writer looks in the mirror when she reflects. It’s sometimes a bit odd because who you might see is a stranger to you: a self at work, thinking, writing, and reading. This is a familiar self, but not one that you watch very often, at least from the outside. For this reason, reflection is a way of inquiring that is hard to get used to, but it is increasingly effective as you become more and more familiar with the writer and reader in the mirror.

2. **Audience:**
   - This way of inquiring can be composed for others, usually your instructor or peers, but can be valuable if written solely for you.
   - If your audience is your instructor, she will be interested in how clearly you see yourself and how well you can use the language of the writing and reading process to describe your challenges and your strengths.

3. **Purpose:**
   - Reflection helps you get control over your processes, such as writing and reading, so that you’re more efficient and adaptable at both.
   - Reflection is also a good way of solving problems when you get stuck in the middle of a process, or if you want to learn as much as you can about future applications of a process after you’ve tried it.

4. **Time:**
   - Reflection takes time, of course, but it also takes timing. There are certain stages in the writing and reading processes that are particularly ripe for reflective thinking, such as when you’re stuck, when you’ve finished a sketch or a draft, before revision, and after you’ve revised. Reflection can be useful anytime you’ve reached a point in the process when stepping back from the task and considering the process would be helpful.

5. **Expertise:**
   - Knowledge of your subject is not necessary; knowledge of yourself and how you engage in your process is. Expertise here entails a willingness to look openly at how you do things and how you think in certain situations.
   - A working knowledge of the writing and reading processes is helpful, as well as some familiarity with the language we use to talk about those processes.
6. Genre:
- Current genres that involve reflection include portfolios, cover letters with assignments, and other forms of self-evaluation.
- As inquiry-based teaching and learning theories become more widespread, forms of reflective writing will be assigned more frequently in classes.

**Reflection**

**The Writer:** You are the subject
**Audience:** Concern can be low or high
**Purpose:** To gain control over a process
**Time:** Takes time and timing
**Expertise:** You’re already an expert on yourself
**Genres:** Journal writing, reflective letters, self-assessments, portfolio

**Exercise 3.4**

Reflecting on Your Process

Reflect on the process of completing any of this chapter's preceding exercises (Exercises 3.1 through 3.3).

**Step One:** Take a few minutes and review all the journal work you generated from the exercises. As you do, make two lists:

1. Things I usually do when writing.
2. Things that are new to me.

In the first column, jot down activities, processes, ways of seeing or thinking, or techniques that you *often* use when writing for school that you *used* when doing the exercises. In the second column, list activities, processes, ways of seeing or thinking, or techniques that you *rarely* use or *have never* used when writing for school.

**Step Two:** In small groups, discuss your lists.

- How do your experiences with the exercises compare to others in your group?
- What part of the process in the exercises seemed most familiar? Least familiar?
- What did you find most useful in the exercises? Least useful?
- What do you notice about what members of your group were taught about the writing process in earlier school experiences?
• Which ways of inquiring were the richest ways of seeing for you? Which presented difficulty?

**MARLA’S JOURNAL**

**EXERCISE 3.4**

**STEP ONE**

1. Things I usually do when writing
   • Wait until the last minute
   • Just get started on the draft
   • Try to get it right in the first draft so I don’t have to revise
   • Figure out what I want to say first
   • Try to write the perfect first sentence

2. Things that are new to me
   • That it’s okay to write “bad”
   • You can change your mind about what you think
   • It’s important to collect a lot of information before you start
   • The journal can help
   • I like exploring but don’t much like explaining

**SYMPHONIC INQUIRY**

When we write, we rarely make exclusive use of just one of the four ways of inquiring. Instead, we explore, explain, evaluate, and reflect in concert, unconsciously shifting from one to the other. Even in a fastwrite, the seeming refuge of exploration, writers often make use of explanation, evaluation, and reflection as they circle a subject and discover their feelings and motives.

When you bring all four ways of inquiring together you achieve symphonic inquiry. But how do you do that? Learning the opening questions to ask yourself helps a lot. Soon, asking these questions becomes second nature. Taking time to reflect on how you’re approaching a task also helps, particularly for an apprentice to inquiry-based learning. For instance, perhaps your essays come up a bit short on information and your instructor complains that your ideas are fairly obvious. Reflecting on this, you realize that you tend to short-circuit exploration in a rush to judgment. Next time,
you try doing more open-ended writing in your journal before you try to come up with a thesis.

You also can incorporate some practical techniques into your reading and writing processes that promote symphonic inquiry. The double-entry journal, or some variation of it, can really help you to shift back and forth between creative and critical thinking. You also might establish the habit of writing summaries or other explanations of the things you’re reading in your notebook or in the margins of the article you’re reading. Shifting from one way of inquiring to another is like shifting from one instrument to another. You’re both a composer and the conductor of this orchestra, and your task is to create the music of surprise and discovery.

**EXERCISE 3.5**

Creating Music with “A Voice for the Lonely,” by Stephen Corey

**STEP ONE: COLLECT.** Read Stephen Corey’s “A Voice for the Lonely” using a double-entry journal to collect notes as you read. On the left page of your journal, jot down passages that seem important to your understanding of the piece: facts, important details, and so on. Collect any fragments from the essay that you’d like to think more about, perhaps because you find them puzzling, powerful, or potentially significant.

**A VOICE FOR THE LONELY**  
Stephen Corey

1 The right silence can be a savior, especially in these days of motorcycles, leaf blowers, and malls that thrum with a thousand voices and dozens of sundry machines. Five or six days a week, I get up pretty early—generally around 4 a.m.—and one of the things I like most about those last hours of darkness is their stillness. The house is quiet, the streets are quiet, and (except on weekends, when some of the serious drunks are hanging on) the all-night restaurants are quiet. Reading and writing and thinking come more easily when you know you won’t be interrupted, and over the past twenty years I’ve never found a better mental bodyguard than the hours before dawn.

2 I got my first serious training as an early riser when I acquired a newspaper delivery route in seventh grade: three miles of widely scattered houses on the edge of Jamestown, New York, and beyond—just me, the moon, darkness, and the various faces of silence. I recall stopping my
brisk walk sometimes, especially in winter when every step squaked and crunched on the snow that nearly always covered the ground, and marveling at how there were no sounds except those of my own making. But just as often, that quiet made me nervous, even though my hometown was awfully safe in those days. I learned to offset the urge to look over my shoulder by carrying a pocket-sized transistor radio.

The music helped me to cope with more than just the empty morning streets—I was, as I said, in seventh (and then eighth, and finally ninth) grade during those lone marches. In short, I was just learning something of what much of that music was about: love—lost, found, hoped for, and despaired of.

Most habits die hard, and old ones can seem immortal. Last week, I was up as usual at 4 A.M., and I headed out in the car toward the nearest newspaper box. As always during these quick runs, I flipped on the radio for some wake-up rhythms to jolt my system for the solitary work time soon to come back at the house.

Instead of music, I caught the voice of the all-night deejay just as she was saying, “We have tragic news in over the wire: singer Roy Orbison is dead...” She gave a quick flurry of details (heart attack, Hendersonville, North Carolina, hospital), repeated the central fact—“Roy Orbison, dead at 52”—and then (my heart applauds her still for this) said not a word but cut straight into “Only the Lonely.”

There I was, cruising down the abandoned city street with the radio now up as loud as I could stand it, mouthing the rising and falling words, rocking side to side as I held the wheel, and riding Orbison’s waiting, nearly-cracking voice back twenty-four years to the passenger seat of Jon Cresanti’s Volkswagen beetle.

We’re told these days that the hottest and fastest wire into memory is our sense of smell, but music must run a close second. Some songs carry us into a certain mood, some to a general region of our past lives, and some to a very particular moment and situation in time. Jon and I were brought together by chance and loneliness for a couple of months during our sophomore year in high school. The alphabetical seating in our homeroom put us next to each other in the back row, and Jon was a talker. We hadn’t known each other before: we came from different parts of town, had different friends, and moved through different sequences of classes. But for a while we found a bond: my girlfriend had recently dropped me after more than a year of going steady, and Jon had eyes for a girl who had none for him.
I had time—all the time I was no longer spending with my girl. John had a car and was old enough to drive it, having failed a grade and thereby become a crucial year older than the typical sophomore. I signed on board, and we cruised day after day, weekend after weekend, killing time and eating at the wondrous new “fast food restaurant” that had just opened. We sat in his car eating 15-cent hamburgers and 12-cent french fries near the real golden arches, the kind that curved up and over the entire little structure (no inside seating, no bathrooms)—and, naturally, listening to the radio. The Four Seasons were with us, as were The Beach Boys, Nat King Cole, The Supremes.

But in those two desperate months of shotgunning for Jon, there was only one song that really mattered, one song we waited for, hoped for, and even called the radio station and asked for: Roy Orbison’s “Pretty Woman.”

That opening handful of heavy guitar notes (a lovesick teenager’s equivalent of Beethoven’s Fifth) carried us into a world of possibility, a world where a moment’s fancy could generate love, where losers could be winners just by wishing for success. The pretty woman walks on by, and another failure has occurred—but suddenly, the downward sweep of the wheel is reversed as the woman turns to walk back, and there is nothing in the world but fulfillment of one’s dreams.

Pop songs are full of such stuff, of course, and have been for as long as the phonograph record and the radio have been with us; we get all kinds of talk about the importance of television in modern life, but I think we need more examination of the ways we have been encompassed by music. I’m not talking about ranting “discussions” of the immorality of certain strains of pop music, but some real studies of the much wider and deeper implications of growing up in a world awash with radio waves.

Needless to say, I wasn’t concerned about such matters there in the McDonald’s parking lot. I wouldn’t even have thought about what it was in Orbison’s singing that made him so important to me. I took the words of the song’s story for their relevance to my own emotional state, and I floated with those words inside a musical accompaniment that both soothed and roused my fifteen-year-old body.

When I heard of Orbison’s death, I found myself wanting to figure out just what it was in that strange voice that might have been so compelling for me and others across the years. I think it might be in the way the voice itself often seems about to fail: in Orbison’s strange and constant modulations, from gravelly bass-like sounds to strong tenor-like passages to piercing falsetto cries, there is the feeling for the listener that the singer is always about to lose control, about to break down under the
weight of what he is trying to sing. Never mind that this is not true, that Orbison’s style was one carefully achieved; what we are talking about here is emotional effect, the true stuff of pop and country music.

If Roy could make it, we could make it. And if Roy could stand failing, so could we.

This feeling of camaraderie with the faraway record star increased for me, I think, the first time I saw him. He was so ordinary looking—no, he was so homely, so very contrary to what one expects romantic musical heroes to look like. He was us.

The right singer, the right sadness, the right silence. The way I heard the story of the death of Orbison’s wife in 1966 (and the way I’ll keep believing it) was that the two of them were out motorcycling when an errant car or truck hit them from an angle. She was riding just a few feet to the side of and behind him, so the other vehicle clipped the back of his cycle but caught hers full force. I’ve never gotten over this chilling illustration of the forces of circumstance and the fate of inches, so much so that over the years I have regularly found the story called to mind for retelling in classrooms or at parties.

I graduated from high school the year of the accident, and Orbison disappeared from the national music scene. (It wasn’t until recently that I heard how the death of two sons by fire in 1967 compounded Orbison’s private tragedies.) Oddly, there is a way in which the disappearance or the death of a singer these days doesn’t really matter to his or her listeners, since that person is still present in exactly the same way as before. All the songs take on a slightly new cast, but the singer still lives in a way that one’s own deceased relatives and friends cannot.

When my girl wanted me back, I dropped Jon’s friendship and never tried to regain it—a not-very-commendable way to be. But we were glued for a while by those banging Orbison notes and those erratic vocals, and maybe that was enough, or at least all that one could hope for.

Music can block out silence, on dark scary roads and in moments of loneliness. But there’s also a sense or two in which a song can create silence: when we’re “lost in a song” the rest of the world around us makes, for all practical purposes, no sound. And in an even more strange way, a song we love goes silent as we “listen” to it, leaving us in that rather primitive place where all the sounds are interior ones—sounds which can’t be distinguished from feelings, from pulsings and shiverings, from that gut need to make life stronger than death for at least a few moments.

When “Only the Lonely” faded, that wonderful deejay still knew enough not to say a word. She threw us straight forward, 4:15 A.M., into “Pretty Woman.”
STEP TWO: EXPLORE. On the opposing right page of your journal, begin an open-ended fastwrite that explores your reaction to the facts and details of the story that you have written on the left hand page. Answer the following questions: What does the essay mean to you? In what ways does it connect to your own experience? What does it make you think or feel? What might the passages or other fragments you collected mean, and how might they contribute to the themes of the essay?

STEP THREE: FOCUS. Shift to a critical mode of thinking, and analyze what you have written and collected so far. In no more than three sentences, state what you currently believe to be the main concept or idea behind Corey’s essay. This is your thesis statement. Do this in the right column, underneath your fastwriting from the previous step.

STEP FOUR: EXPLAIN. Immediately below your thesis statement, explain to yourself how the passages or fragments you collected from the essay in the left column (and others you may yet gather) contribute to your interpretation of “A Voice for the Lonely.”

STEP FIVE: COLLECT. Reread the essay, and collect evidence—quotes, passages, details—that seem to support or extend your thesis. Add these to the notes you’ve already collected on the left page of your notebook.

STEP SIX: FOCUS. Revise your thesis statement to reflect your latest thinking about Corey’s essay. Do this on the right page.

STEP SEVEN: EVALUATE. Reread your journal, and jot down in the right column at least four reasons you think your interpretation of the essay is correct. These are “because” statements that might naturally follow your thesis. For example, “I think Corey’s essay is about ______ because _______.”

STEP EIGHT: DRAFT. Using the writing and thinking you’ve generated so far, draft a 300- to 500-word response to the essay. It should declare and support your thesis statement. If you can, begin your piece with a passage from “A Voice for the Lonely” that is important to your understanding of the essay.

STEP NINE: REFLECT. After completing your response, write a cover letter for it addressed to your instructor. You letter should address the following questions:

• As you were using your writing to think through your response to Corey’s essay did you find that your ideas about it evolved or did they stay pretty much the same? Did anything surprise you?
• Which step in the exercise seemed most productive for you? Why?
• Can you imagine how you might use a process like this to write your own essays?
**WRITING WITH COMPUTERS**

**USING THE COMMENTS FUNCTION**

The comments function of your word processor can be a particularly useful tool for reflecting on your own writing. This function allows you to reflect at length on any word or passage within your draft without actually inserting any words into the text. To add comments to a word processor document, just highlight a word or passage and select the comment function under the *Insert* menu. A window will then appear in which you can compose your comments. When you complete your comments, the word or passage in question will remain highlighted in the main text but your comments will only appear if you move and hold the cursor over the highlighted text. While you can easily go back and delete your comments individually, if you are going to make extensive comments throughout the draft, it is advisable to save a copy of the original draft and make your comments to the copy.

- What comparisons would you make between your experience in this exercise and the other four exercises in this chapter? What questions do you have about the four ways of inquiring?

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**USING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED**

Section Two: Inquiry Projects, which follows, will introduce a range of genres and writing assignments. While each has different features and purposes, I believe you’ll find that the *process* of composing these essays draws heavily on what you’ve learned about writing in these first three chapters. Whether you’re writing a personal essay or a research paper, some of the same things will guide you:

- The spirit of inquiry will guide your writing.
- You will use the power of questions to help you to see what isn’t immediately obvious.
- You will employ constructive habits of mind, such as making the familiar strange, suspending judgment, and searching for surprise.
- You will make rhetorical choices based on the needs of the writing or reading situation.
- You will use dialectical thinking to guide your writing and reading processes, moving back and forth between the creative and the critical.
- You will use exploration, explanation, evaluation, and reflection to get the most out of your inquiry projects.
- You will experience the pleasure of using writing to not only say what you already know but to discover what you didn’t know you knew.