

### SELECTING YOUR STRATEGY

As you work your way through the writing process, you will uncover various patterns for developing your ideas. In *planning*, these patterns often emerge as answers to the basic questions you might ask about any body of information: *What is it? How does it work? Why does it matter?* These questions are like the different lenses you attach to your camera: each lens gives you a different picture of your subject. Suppose you want to write an essay on the subject of women and science. You might begin by asking why so few women are ranked among the world's great scientists. You might continue asking questions. What historical forces have discouraged women from becoming scientists? How do women scientists define problems, analyze evidence, and formulate conclusions, and do they go about these processes differently than men? If women scientists look at the world differently than men do, does this difference have an effect on the established notions of inquiry? As you can see, each question not only shifts your perspective on your subject but also suggests a different method for developing your information about it.

If planning gives you the opportunity to envision your subject from a variety of perspectives, then *drafting* encourages you to develop the pattern (or patterns) that appear to you most effective for demonstrating your purpose. In some writing projects, a pattern may seem to emerge naturally from your planning. If you decide to write about your observation of a game of lacrosse, your choice seems obvious: to tell what happened. In attempting this, however, you may need to answer other questions about this unfamiliar sport: What do the field and equipment look like? What rules govern the way the game is played? How is it similar to or different from other sports? Developing this new information may complicate your original purpose.

You can solve this problem most effectively during *revision*. As you look over your draft, you will need to make two decisions. First, you must decide whether individual segments or patterns of information develop or distort your purpose. The history of lacrosse—its creation by Iroquois Indians, its discovery by French explorers, and its development by Canadians—is an interesting body of information, but it may need to be reshaped, relocated, or even eliminated to preserve your original purpose—to tell what happened. Second, you must decide whether your original design, a design that often mirrors the process by which you uncovered your information, is still the best method for presenting your information to your audience. Instead of telling “what happened,” you may decide that you can best express your ideas by choosing a more formal structure—comparing lacrosse to games with which your readers are more familiar, such as soccer or hockey.

Whatever you decide, you need to understand the purpose, audience, and strategies of each pattern if you are going to use it successfully to develop a paragraph, a section of your essay, or your whole essay. For that reason, we have organized *The Riverside Reader* to demonstrate the most common patterns and questions encountered in the writing process:

Narration and Description: What happened? What did it look like?

Process Analysis: How do you do it?

Comparison and Contrast: How is it similar or different?

Division and Classification: What kind of subdivisions does it contain?

Definition: How would you characterize it?

Cause and Effect: Why did it happen? What happened next?

Persuasion and Argument: How can you prove it?

The introductions to the chapters that feature each of these patterns of development explain its purpose, audience, and strategies. The essays in each chapter are arranged in an ascending order of complexity and are followed by questions that call your attention to how the writer has asserted his or her purpose, addressed his or her audience and used the various techniques of each strategy to develop his or her essay. If you study these essays, answer these questions and check the Points to Remember at the end of each introduction, you will see how you can adapt these common writing patterns to your writing.

By analyzing these strategies in action, you will also learn two important lessons. First, you will understand what you are expected to write when you encounter words such as *describe*, *compare*, and *define* in a writing assignment. Second, you will discover that you do not have to limit yourself to a single pattern for an entire piece of writing. Writers may structure their essay around one dominant strategy but use other strategies to enrich or advance their purpose.

The following guidelines will help you in selecting an appropriate strategy.

## *Guidelines for Selecting Your Strategy*

### I. WHAT STRATEGY DOES YOUR WRITING ASSIGNMENT REQUIRE?

- a. What words—such as *define* or *defend*—are embedded in your writing assignment?
- b. What assumptions and expectations do these words evoke?

## II. WHAT STRATEGY EMERGES AS YOU PLAN YOUR ESSAY?

- a. What questions naturally occur to you as you study a particular subject?
- b. What patterns of development do these questions suggest?

## III. WHAT OTHER STRATEGIES EMERGE AS YOU DRAFT YOUR ESSAY?

- a. What new questions emerge as you draft your writing?
- b. What kind of information do you need to answer these questions?

## IV. HOW CAN YOU REVISE YOUR ESSAY TO INCLUDE THIS NEW INFORMATION?

- a. Does this new information distort or develop your purpose?
- b. Will it require you to impose a new strategy on your information to clarify your purpose to your readers?

## V. HOW CAN YOU MIX STRATEGIES TO ENRICH YOUR ESSAY?

- a. How does mixing strategies supplement your purpose?
- b. How might such mixing confuse your readers?

### *Student Essay*

#### STUDENT WRITER IN PROGRESS

Kristie Ferguson "The Scenic Route"

The following material illustrates how one student, Kristie Ferguson, responded to a writing assignment by working her way through the writing process.

*Writing Assignment:* Read Virginia Woolf's "Shakespeare's Sister." Then compose a narrative that describes the experiences that contributed to (or prevented) your development as a writer.

Planning (Journal Entry)

I am not sure I ever developed as a writer. My teachers all seemed to want different things.

Never made Mrs. Scott's bulletin board  
Mrs. Pageant and those dumb squirrels  
Logan and that contest.

I could never figure out what they wanted. I suppose they wanted to teach me. But I always felt lost.

*Possible Hypothesis:* I should probably describe what I didn't learn. How my confusion prevented me from becoming a good writer. But then how do you explain that contest?

Drafting (Discovery Draft)

## What's Wrong with This Picture?

On one of those days that convinces you certain things don't belong together, like sunshine and first grade or hot flashes in Alaska, another writing period was about to begin. At the grand old age of six, I was certain that I would never learn to write. After all I had never made the list. In the corner of our room, Mrs. Scott kept a bulletin board commending those in the class who had neat handwriting and no spelling errors. I was cursed on both counts. My handwriting looked like hieroglyphics, and my spelling always made people ask, "What's wrong with this picture."

That day Mrs. Scott surprised us. "Class, I'm cutting writing period in half so that you can go to the auditorium to see a movie." Freedom! Relief! I started to clap my hands. But wait! Something was wrong with this picture. "I am going to ask you to write a brief theme," Mrs. Scott continued. "When you are done you can

go to the auditorium." I knew there must be a catch. Still, it was only a brief theme and afterward there was a movie. I grabbed my Number 2 and thumbed through my notebook looking for a clean page. "One more thing," she announced. "You must spell all words neatly and correctly. No erasers or dictionaries. I may ask for do-over's." No eraser? No dictionary? Why not cut off both my arms?

How was I ever going to make it to the auditorium? I started slowly, reminding myself to make each letter and word carefully. When I finished, I went to Mrs. Scott's desk. "Too sloppy. Misspelled words." I retreated to my desk for another try. This time she smiled. "Misspelled word. Do it over." I slumped back to my desk. The next time I looked up the room was empty. Desperate, I narrowed the culprit to one of those "ie" words. I rubbed out the letters, reprinted them, and placed a dot more or less between them. I handed my paper to Mrs. Scott. "You erased," she hissed. She was such a treasure. "No ma'am." She eyed the paper and me again, and then, finally, let me go. At last--the movie.

Collapsing near my best friend Karla, I arrived in time to watch the end of a promotion film for dental hygiene. Teeth! All that for teeth!

### Revision (Revision Agenda)

1. What is my purpose?

Tell a story about my early failures as a writer. Most of my grade school teachers emphasized handwriting and spelling and I was terrible at both.

2. Who is my audience?

Everyone who has gone to school. They have all had a Mrs. Scott. Most remember that in

school good writing meant good handwriting and no mistakes.

3. What strategies do I use?

I focused on my attempt to complete one writing assignment so I could go to a movie. I slowed the pace down and described the details of my writing process. I also used dialogue to dramatize Mrs. Scott.

4. What revisions do I want to make in my next draft?

- a. Include other writing experiences--fourth grade, high school.
- b. Rework introduction--state thesis--to explain why I am telling these stories.

New Hypothesis: I like the story because it tells how I tricked Mrs. Scott--and then myself. All that work for teeth. But I take too long getting there. Is learning how to write simply learning a trick? Maybe it's more like taking a trip.

Second Draft

The Scenic Route

As a writer, I always seem to take the scenic route. I don't plan it that way. My teachers provide detailed maps pointing me down the most direct road, but somehow I miss a turn or make a wrong turn and there I am--standing at some unmarked crossroads, head pounding, stomach churning, hopelessly lost. On such occasions, I used to curse my teachers, my maps, and myself. But recently, I have come to expect, even enjoy, in a perverse way, the confusion and panic of being lost. Left to my own devices, I have learned to discover my own way to my destination. And afterwards, I have a story to tell.

I did not learn this all at once. In the beginning I was confused about where I was going. One day in first grade, Mrs. Scott told us that if we wrote a brief theme we could go to a movie. I grabbed my Number 2 and listened for directions. "No erasers. No dictionaries. I may ask for do-over's." Lost! I was the worst speller in the class. My first draft was "Too sloppy. Do it over." My second, "Misspelled word. Do it over." Now I was really lost. One misspelled word. They all looked right--and then they all looked wrong. Blind luck led me to one of those "ie" words. I rubbed out the letters, reprinted them, and placed the dot between them. "Kristie, you erased," she hissed. "No ma'am." She eyed my paper and then me again, and with a sigh waved me toward the auditorium. Collapsing next to my best friend, Karla, I arrived in time to watch a film about dental hygiene. Teeth! All that for teeth!

My next problem was trying to figure out why I was going. Mrs. Pageant, my fifth-grade teacher, was the source of my confusion. Seemingly unaware of my errors, she wrote enthusiastic notes on all my essays, suggesting on one, "Kristie, you're so creative. Why don't you write a book?" Why indeed? Why should the first-grade dummy begin such a perilous journey? "You should, Kristie. You really should. You could even write a fantasy book like the one we read today." Luckily fantasy was my forte. I used to make up stories about the family of squirrels in my backyard. And so I wrote *Squirrel Family Starts a Grocery Store*, in which, after the hoopla on page one, the squirrels run out of food on page three and close their store on page four.

As she read my book to the class, Mrs. Pageant could hardly contain herself. "What a delightful story, Kristie. You must write another

immediately." My head pounded. My stomach churned. I had stumbled onto one story, but why keep going? Because Mrs. Pageant "just loved" those dumb squirrels. So there was *Squirrel Family Starts a Bank*, in which the squirrels run out of money, and *Squirrel Family Starts a Newspaper*, in which they run out of stories. By then I was looking for the nearest off-ramp. I couldn't think of another squirrel story, and Karla told me that if she had to listen to one more, she would throw up.

When I got to the eleventh grade, I knew for the first time where I was going and why. The poster on Mr. Logan's bulletin board announced a writing contest: "Threats to the Free Enterprise System." Sponsored by the Blair County Board of Realtors. First prize \$200. Now my problem was how to get there. Mr. Logan took us to the school library and mapped out the first half of his strategy. Look up sources in the database. Take notes. Organize notes into an outline for first draft. It seemed like a sensible plan, but, as usual, I got lost at the first turn. I pulled a few books off the shelf, but it was pointless. I couldn't find anything on free enterprise or anybody who was threatening it.

As the deadline for the first draft approached, I was so desperate I asked my parents for directions. "Ask some local business people what they think." Not bad for parents. I borrowed my father's tape recorder and made the rounds--the grocery store, the pizza parlor, the newspaper. Most of the people seemed a lot like me--lost. They talked a lot, but they didn't focus on the question. Maybe I was asking the wrong question. I listened to the tape a couple of times and picked out some common themes. Then I rewrote my questions: "How do taxes, government regulation and foreign

competition threaten your business?" The next time around people seemed to know what they were talking about. I organized their answers under my three categories, wrote out my draft, and made the deadline.

In class, Mr. Logan announced the second half of his strategy. Read draft. Listen to student and teacher responses. Revise draft. Mail essay. Karla went first. She quoted every book in the school library. Looking down at my paper, I saw myself stranded again. After a few more papers I felt better. All the papers sounded alike. I knew my quotes would be different--the guy at the pizza parlor, the newspaper editor. "You didn't do any research," Karla complained. "I bet you didn't read one article." A chorus of "yes's" came from the guys in the back row. Mr. Logan didn't say anything for a while. Then, smiling, he looked at Karla. "What is research?" Now Karla looked lost. The guys looked in their notebooks. Silence. Finally, the bell. What's the answer? What am I supposed to do? Mr. Logan never said. I thought about what I had done, considered my options, and, with a sigh, mailed my essay.

A few weeks later, I was standing not at some unmarked crossroads but in the center of town--behind the lectern in front of a room full of people. A man from the Blair County Board of Realtors handed me a trophy and an envelope and asked me to tell how I wrote the paper. I started to panic and then smiled. "Well . . ." I caught Mr. Logan's eye. "I asked a lot of people what they thought. At first they didn't know what I was talking about. Neither did I. Then I fixed my question and they helped me figure out what to say." I looked at Mr. Logan again. He just smiled. I looked at my trophy and wondered

what to say next. Finally, I said "Well . . . I guess I did research."

Revision (Revision Agenda)

1. What is my purpose?

Describe how I learned to trust my own judgment about writing.

2. Who is my audience?

Again, anyone who has gone to school. Everybody has had to write silly stories and research papers. I bet they all tried to write something for some dumb contest. I suppose another audience might be those guys at the Blair County Board of Realtors.

3. What strategies do I use?

I use brief narratives that I try to connect with my title--"The Scenic Route." I keep Karla in each episode as a kind of commentator. I also use dialogue to dramatize Mrs. Scott, Mrs. Pageant, and Mr. Logan. I try to slow the pace down at important moments--like when I read my research paper for the first time or when I was accepting my trophy.

4. What revisions do I want to make in my next draft?

Rework introduction so I can get right to my thesis---"trust your own judgment."

Do Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Pageant fit thesis? If I cut them, I lose my funniest stuff. If I use them, I'll have to figure out a new way.

This draft seems more organized, but I force my material into the structure--*where* I was going, *why* I was going, *how* I got there. Maybe the scenic route metaphor gets in the way.

Work more with contest. It's the one story that makes my point.

Figure out "what's wrong with this picture?" This essay seems to be getting better and worse at the same time.

*Comment* This essay takes readers on a tour of Kristie's development as a writer and highlights three memorable experiences along the way. Although the narrative focuses on her personal experiences, it conjures up memories for many fledgling writers: first, the autocratic teacher from second grade who demands perfection and loves to punish mistakes; then the sweetie-pie teacher from fifth who gushes and lavishes praise on stuff the writer knows is junk; finally, the practical and organized eleventh-grade teacher who outlines a writing process and guides the students through it for a real world audience.