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# **Paradigm Online Writing Assistant**

**By Chuck Guilford**



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**Online Writing Assistant**  
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# Acknowledgments

**Paradigm Online Writing Assistant**© would not exist without the direct and indirect assistance of many groups and individuals, some of whom I'll never know and others whom I know quite well. I'd especially like to thank my family--my mom and dad, and my sons, Geoff and Nick.

Of special note is my brother Tom, who believed in this project and collaborated with me on an earlier version of **Paradigm** that ran as a Windows® Help file. His untimely death in 1994 was a great loss in many ways, but I think he'd be glad to know his influence continues in this HTML version, which, as he'd no doubt remind me, would be much better if he'd been working on it.

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# 1 Discovering What to Write

## Choosing a Subject

Whether you have an assigned subject or choose your own, you need to get focused and engaged with the project. *Assigned subjects* may look limiting at first, but they offer plenty of room for individual expression. *Open subjects*, while promising great freedom, can be daunting because they don't provide direction. They leave it all up to you. Yet these two situations, different as they appear, present similar challenges.

Either way, you must locate your center of interest, and find what you can say that your reader will value. A good way to begin is to write. Worrying or "mulling things over" seldom works. Worry increases anxiety, and ideas you don't write down get lost or forgotten. Writing gives your thoughts substance and form, so you can return later and reshape or add to them.

To get started then, don't worry about your subject--start writing. Let the process get messy and complicated. Allow yourself freedom to make mistakes. Or head off on a tangent. Mistakes often turn into discoveries. A tangent can develop into a central focus. Try *Freewriting* or *The Journalist's Questions*. Experiment with the following activities. Get carried away. Then pause. Look back over what you've written. Look for patterns, flashes of insight, overriding concerns. Cut. Paste. Add. Move. You'll find that you're well on your way.

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**To get started, don't worry about your subject--start writing. Let the process get messy and complicated. Allow yourself freedom to make mistakes.**

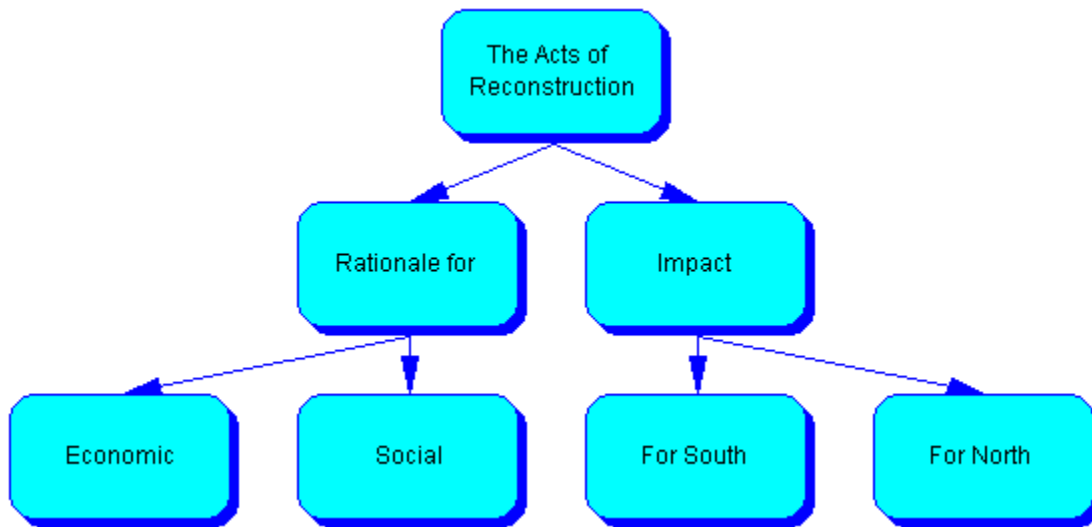
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As you find a center of interest, you may want to narrow your subject's scope, to make it more manageable and specific. For more information on sharpening and focusing a subject, see *From Subject to Thesis*.

**Activities**

**1.1** Make a five to seven item list of writing possibilities. Include one or two "off-the-wall" topics. For instance, if your assigned subject was the Civil War, you might list "strange army hats" as an off-the-wall possibility and later decide it could make a good essay. If possible, talk your list over with a partner or small group.

**1.2** Take two items from the list you made for **Activity 1.1** and divide the subjects into parts on branching trees, as in the example below.



**Hint:** Just copy the table below to your word processor, delete the Civil War terms, and replace them with your own.

		Social
	Rationale for	
		Economic
Acts of Reconstruction		
		For North
	Impact	
		For South

**1.3** Try crossmatching and combining possibilities from your branching trees. Phrase the results as questions:

How did the different social values of the South and the North account for the problems of Reconstruction?

What economic problems did the South experience as a result of the Reconstruction?

How did economic changes caused by the Reconstruction affect social relationships in the South?

Generate as many questions as possible. Don't worry about whether your questions are profound. Include a few off-the-wall questions if you want.

## Freewriting

—

**We discover what to say by saying it, and in the process often surprise ourselves with fresh insights and powerful language.**

—

Talking with friends, we shape our thoughts freely and spontaneously as words rise to our attention and find their way into conversation. We discover what to say by saying it, and in the process often surprise ourselves with fresh insights and powerful language. *Freewriting* is an attempt to capture that same verbal energy on paper.

Freewriting means just what it says: writing freely, without restrictions. When freewriting, you can write whatever you like without regard to spelling, grammar, paragraphing, or whether it makes any sense.

Just let your thoughts wander and follow the ones you like best. Let the others go and pick them up later if you want. Relax and loosen the grip on your pen, enjoy feeling the ink flow, shaping your letters, seeing your thoughts and feelings take shape on the page. Or turn off your computer monitor so you can't see (and judge) what you're writing. If your mind slows down, slow your writing speed. Then when thoughts come faster, pick up your pace. Try getting your mind and fingers to work at the same speed, or let one go ahead and pull the other along.

The only thing you shouldn't do is stop. Then you aren't discovering, aren't writing. You may feel a bit self-conscious at first--most people do--but don't let that bother you. It's unavoidable. Just keep writing, and you'll soon find what you want to say. As you do, keep following your thoughts. Write them down as they come.

Later, you can look back over your freewriting and choose what to keep, change, or delete. But don't reject your own thoughts before even writing them down, and as a result, lose ideas that might prove valuable. For now, just relax and write.

## Activities

**1.4** Practice freewriting for fifteen minutes. You'll be amazed at how much you can write in such a short time. Just start right in. Don't worry about not having anything to say. If that's what you find yourself thinking, just write, "I don't have anything to say," and keep going from there. As long as you keep your fingers moving, something will be drawn out of you.

One of the hardest things you can do is empty your mind of thoughts. Try it and you'll see.

You have the thoughts, just write them down. Don't hold them in. Let your mind go where it will. Turn off your computer monitor. Try adjusting the flow of your thoughts to your writing speed. *You don't have to show this to anyone!*

**1.5** Practice focusing your freewrites. Write for twenty minutes about how you feel about writing; whether you like it or not, whether you've had much experience, what you think you need to work on most, what you'd like to write, or whatever else you want to say about writing.

**1.6** Try "looping" your freewriting. Look back over an earlier freewrite and find a sentence or phrase that stands out for you. Write it down and use it as the starting point for a new freewrite. Repeat the process.

## Observing and Recording Details

When considering what to write, we often think first of ideas, but we'd do well to recall the words of William Carlos Williams, "No ideas but in things." Williams wasn't knocking ideas, just pointing out that they have roots in the concrete particulars of daily experience. Thoughts grow from what we see, taste, smell, and feel: morning steam on a mountain lake, a strawberry dipped in cream, or a crowd squeezing into the subway.

—  
**William Blake  
called the  
senses "the  
doors of  
perception."**  
—

When we read a book, attend a concert, or simply visit with a friend, we perceive the world through our senses. William Blake called the senses "the doors of perception." By opening or closing these "doors," we control the amounts and kinds of input we receive. In class, our ears hear the teacher's words and tone of voice, the intonations and rhythms in her speech. At the same time, our eyes see her changing facial expressions and fluttering hands, the way she leans on the lectern, then paces from desk to window. These sensory details are all parts of the class, and perceptive writers will note them. In fact, though, we aren't as aware of our environments as we might be. A college

basketball game, a lunch at the student union, even a quiet walk in the woods could overwhelm us with stimuli if we don't limit what we take in.

Though ideas help us organize and sort this perceptual flow, we can't think about what we aren't aware of. Sensory data is the raw material of writing. To extend your awareness of your subject, take time to see, taste, hear, smell, and touch what you're writing about. Remove the veil of habit and see the true subject of your writing--not ideas and opinions, but the thing itself.

For instance, if you're writing a report showing why your office needs a new copy machine, you could start by studying the present one. You could note its size and jot down the exact dimensions. You could describe the worn rubber mat on the copy plate. You could point to the glass plate itself, scratched and difficult to align papers on. You might also describe how the copies look, tell how the paper is loaded and how often the machine jams, whether it makes enlargements and reductions easily.

These details and a hundred others can provide your report's content. You don't have to think them up or imagine them, just notice them and write them down clearly and accurately. This habit of alertness and attention to detail is essential. The more you get involved with your subject, the more you'll find to say about it.

## Activities

**1.7** Select an object you have with you now--a pen, a ring, a watch, a shoe, a book--and start writing about it. If you have a favorite possession with you, that's fine, but what you pick isn't important. Almost anything will do. Describe the object thoroughly. What is its shape, its color, its texture? How long is it? Does it make a sound? Does it show signs of age? Does it have any taste or odor? Concentrate on asking and answering questions about the item itself rather than telling where you got it or how you feel about it.

Don't worry about grammar or mechanics; just get down a clear and complete a description. Do notice, though, how much you can find to say about even the most trivial and unpromising subject when you concentrate on observing and recording details.

**1.8** Select a book--any book. Begin writing down as many actual details about it as you can. What is its title? Who is its author? How many pages does it have? When was it published? By whom? Does it have a preface? What are its major divisions? Its subdivisions? What color is it? Just keep writing.

Don't give ideas or judgments about the book. Just give the facts. Write for about twenty minutes. At the end, write a one sentence wrap-up statement to tie your observations together and give a sense of completion. If you wish, use this sentence to offer an overall impression of the book, based on the details you've observed and recorded.

## The Journalist's Questions

The six questions traditionally asked by journalists--*who?* *what?* *when?* *where?* *how?* and *why?*--can be valuable aids to invention in all types of writing.

By using them as probes, you'll look at your subject more closely, and as you do, you'll find pertinent things to say.

The six main questions can also be broken down into subtopics that offer more precise guidance than the major questions. The questions and subtopics may be used in any order. Use them if and when they can help you achieve your writing purpose.

### *Who*

Like the other questions, this one's value depends upon the spirit in which you use it. On the most superficial level, it might yield only a word or two: "this guy I know" or "Aunt Ginny." But answering the question that way is almost like not answering it at all. Getting beyond the surfaces of people--their names, labels, sizes--takes some time and concentration, but adds vital information and force to your writing. The list below contains only a few examples of the kinds of information you can provide under the heading of *who*.

By using them as probes, you'll look at your subject more closely, and as you do, you'll find pertinent things to say.

### Subtopics for Exploring the Question of *Who*

Physical Attributes	Personality Traits	Personal History	Characteristic Possessions
weight	sense of humor	religious	books
height	temper	educational	home furnishings
bone structure	friendliness	medical	athletic equipment
hair	honesty	economic	collections
eyes	generosity	military	pets
musculature	leadership	geographic	home
coordination	competitiveness	family	clothing
body language	compassion	professional	records
complexion	self-assurance	ethnic	automobile

This list isn't meant to be complete. Probably you've already thought of possibilities, even entire categories, that could be included. You may also have seen that many subtopics could be broken down further and discussed at length, "clothing," for instance.

When you see this, you're starting to understand what it means to ask and answer the question of *who*.

### ***What***

The question of *what* can open up interesting avenues of exploration. A whole essay might explore *what* happened, some event or incident you've chosen to tell about. You may want to show *what* a family reunion or a Cesarean section or a Bar Mitzvah or an elk hunt is. By seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling the events, people, and things in your essay, your readers discover *what* the subject is, *what* it means for you, and *what* you want it to mean for them.

Also, most subjects are composites, made up of several parts, and those parts can all be examined and described. What are the various parts of a Bar Mitzvah, for example? How are those parts related to each other? What is the function of each part in relation to the whole?

Subtopics of What
What is its purpose?
What is its value?
What is its shape?
What are its limits?
What class of things does it belong to?
How is it similar to other members of its class?
How does it differ from other members of its class?
What are its parts?
Is it a part of a larger whole?
What is its color, weight, texture, sound, odor?
What is its history?
What are its causes?
What are its effects?
What is its duration?
What is its meaning?
What is its formal definition?

As you can see, the question of *what* is quite open-ended. If you ask it with imagination and energy, it can lead your writing into interesting territory.

### ***When***

Everything happens in time, and the question of *when* locates events in time. On the most superficial level, this could mean just giving a date and time: 2:59 p.m., Thursday, July 12, 1996. In most writing, however, such exact fixing of time isn't necessary. "One rainy winter morning just before breakfast" may set the time nicely for one piece, while "Easter Sunday when I was thirteen years old" might do the job for another. *When* can also be used to show relationships in time, as when we say, "Before stepping up to the ticket booth, I stretched a little to make myself look taller." Like the other questions, *when* can be subdivided into subtopics that may help you uncover further possibilities for exploration.

<b>Subtopics of When</b>
When did this happen?
How often does it happen?
When had it happened previously?
When will it happen again?
Why didn't it happen at some other time?
What conditions must be met in order for it to happen?
What happened before this?
What happened after this?
What else was happening at the same time?
How would this have been different if it had happened at some other time?
How is it similar to things that have happened at other times?
Was this good or a bad time for it to happen?
When was it first noticed and last observed?
What were the characteristics of the time?
How long did it last?

It's hard to imagine a paper that would use all or even most of these questions. Still, this list should give you an idea of how the question of *when* can help you discover what to say.

## **Where**

Everything is somewhere, and describing that place serves two important functions. First, it permits your readers to discover the sights, sounds, smells, the whole physical environment. Descriptive detail enriches the environmental texture, making it fuller and more vivid. The scene is rendered and invites readers to enter it imaginatively.

Also, *where* can show how setting shapes events. How was the battle's outcome affected by the fact that it took place in a steep-walled canyon with only one exit? How was the family reunion influenced by its taking place for the first time at Uncle Ted's house? Might the crawdaddies have turned out differently if you'd cooked them at home in your own kitchen?

<b>Subtopics of Where</b>
What is the immediate location?
What is its size?
What is its shape?
What are its boundaries?
Of what larger area is it a part?
What does it resemble?
How do people perceive it?
What psychological or emotional associations does it have?
What is its history?
What are its dominant sights, smells, sounds?
How is the place influenced by the participants?
How do these events happen to be occurring in this place?

Use the question of *where* to orient your readers and help them know not only where things are happening but *what* this place is like and *why* it is of importance.

## **How**

The question of *how* directs us toward method and procedure, toward process. Readers might not understand the exact nature of the action or the various parts, steps, and stages that constitute a process. An essay on a family vacation might tell *how* the destination and modes of transportation were chosen, *how* the reservations