INTRODUCTION

The overall purpose of *Aims and Options: A Thematic Approach to Writing,* second edition, is to provide clear and simple general instructions for writing college papers. A more specific purpose is to help you—the student writer—come up with new ideas and draw on your experiences both to enrich the writing process and to improve the quality of its product.

COMMUNICATION TRIANGLE

The most basic guideline for writing is the communication triangle (Figure I.1). It identifies the four main components of writing: the *writer,* the *reader,* the *topic,* and the *message.*

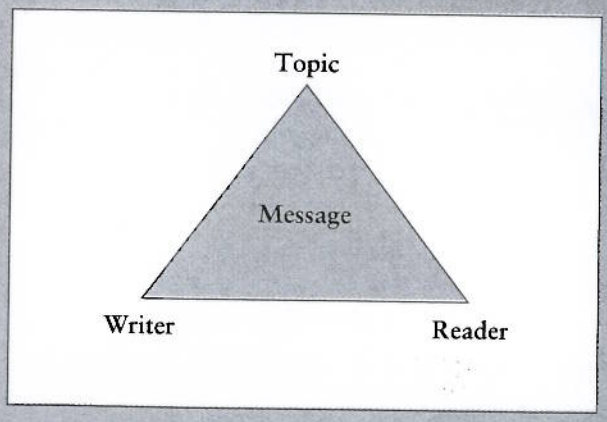


FIGURE I.1

Communication triangle

Each point of the triangle represents an important element of writing: the *writer,* the *reader,* and the *topic.* Inside the triangle is the central idea that the writer wants to communicate about the topic to the reader: the *message.*

The *writer* is you. As a writer, you bring all of your attitudes, experiences, observations, research, and, most importantly, *yourself* to the subject. Suppose your subject is civil rights. Your attitudes about civil

rights are affected by the interactions you have had with other people, by what you have seen on television or at the movies, by what you have read. And you bring these attitudes to your writing.

In addition to your own attitudes and knowledge about civil rights, you have to look outside yourself and determine how your *reader* feels about the topic of civil rights. What are the reader's values? experiences? economic and social status? intellect? age? expectations? attitudes? For example, someone who grew up in a segregated rural community during the 1960s probably feels very differently about civil rights than does someone who grew up in an integrated middle-class suburb during the 1980s. What you know about the reader affects how you deal with the topic.

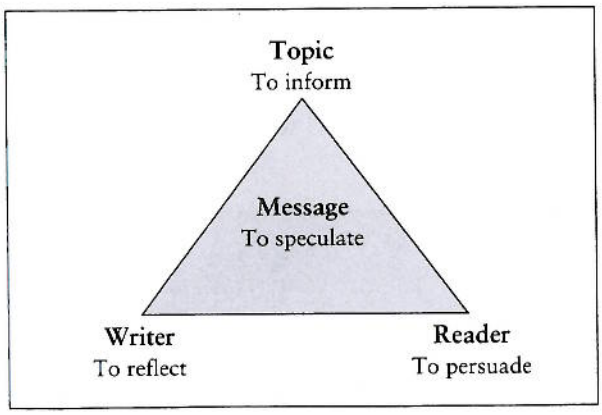
And because the *topic* is anything that has been thought, said, written, and believed about civil rights, you can't possibly write about, nor can your reader possibly understand, all the information there is on this topic. As a writer, then, with your reader in mind, you must determine what you want to say about the topic and how you will say it. From the process of selecting and limiting what you want to say comes your *message,* the central idea of your paper. The message is influenced by the three other elements of the communication triangle: the writer, the reader, and the topic.

WRITING AIMS

Each of the components of writing that make up the communication triangle is linked to one of the four primary purposes for writing: *to reflect, to inform, to persuade,* and *to speculate* (Figure I.2).

FIGURE I.2

Writing aims



If you are writing a paper about your own experiences with and opinions on civil rights, the aim of the paper is *to reflect* (for example,

retelling a personal experience with prejudice). If you emphasize the topic, your aim is *to inform* (describing different types of nonviolent demonstrations such as sit-ins, boycotts, or marches). If your emphasis is on the reader, your aim is *to persuade* (encouraging a campus organization to participate in Brotherhood Week). And if your chief focus is on the message or on possibilities—what might be or what might have been—your aim is *to speculate* (envisioning changes in civil rights over the next twenty years).

Writing to Reflect

The chief characteristic of reflective writing is self-expression. When you write to reflect, you want to share with others how you feel or think about a topic. You want to share impressions, ideas, or moments that are significant to you. Although you also may be informing or persuading your readers, your main focus is on you. Your thoughts, emotions, and experiences become the subject of the writing.

Personal experiences often are very private and often don't pertain to anyone but you. These private experiences are what you write about in your journal or in letters to close friends. You don't intend for them to be read by all people. When you're asked to write reflectively for a college assignment, however, you're being asked to share your experiences with a larger audience, usually to make a specific point. Reflective writing involves *recalling* a personal experience, *commenting* on that experience, and *providing* new insights about the significance of that experience to yourself and to others. Your comment on and the insights gained from your personal experiences can increase the understanding of your topic for a wider audience.

Writing to Reflect

Characteristics	*Examples*
Express self	Journal
Share personal experiences	Personal essay
	Autobiography
	Personal letter

An example of reflective writing is James Roberson's description of demonstrating against segregation in the mid-1950s. Roberson writes about the frustrations he felt in being forced to sit at the back of a bus simply because of his skin color and about the ways in which he and his friends dealt with that frustration.

> The green sign on the Birmingham city buses was one of the most powerful pieces of wood in the city. It was about the size of a shoe box and fit into the holes on the back of the bus seats. On one side of the board it said "Colored, do not sit beyond this board." The bus driver had the authority to move that green board in any direction he wanted to at any time.
>
> To give you an example, the bus might be headed for Collegeville in North Birmingham, where blacks lived. When the maids and chauffeurs and street sweepers—those were the jobs for blacks in those days—would get on the bus, they'd all be seated. In another mile, ten whites might get on. The driver would get the green board, move it, and the blacks would have to get up. A seventy-year old black person might have to move for a six-year-old white child.
>
> A group of us formed a little club called the Eagles. When we would get on the buses, I would take the green sign and move it up or throw it away. I was a teenager, and that was my way of fighting the system.
>
> Sometimes we would defy the green board. We would sit right behind the bus driver. You really had to imagine the driver as a cobra snake or a vicious dog, and you're treading on his territory. You know that if you move close to him, he's going to strike you. The driver would say, "All right, you niggers got to get up."
>
> We'd say, "You talking to us?" There were guys who were like conductors and drove black plain cars. The bus driver would get off and call one of those guys. He would come on and say, "Get off or we're gonna call the law."
>
> "So call them," we said. When he'd go to call, we'd get off the bus and disappear.

In this example Roberson is writing to reflect. He relies on personal memory to meet his objective: describing segregation on the Birmingham city buses and illustrating how he and others demonstrated against that segregation.

Writing to Inform

Another purpose for writing is to inform. When your purpose is primarily to report information, to explain a concept, or to describe an object, your writing is informative. The emphasis here is on the topic, not on the writer or the reader. News stories often are informative: their aim is to present facts and information objectively, without introducing reporters' opinions or personal experiences. The writers simply state the major events of an incident. Other examples of writing that informs are directions or explanations of how a computer or a satellite works. The

characteristics of informative writing include accurate reporting; unbiased presentation; and clear, specific examples or explanations.

Writing to Inform

Characteristics	*Examples*
Report information	Newspaper article
Explain a concept	Research paper
Describe an object	Report of events
	Summary

Here is an example of writing that informs, from an article by Roxanne Brown. In her report, Brown describes Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the rear of a bus on December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama.

> After a long day at the Montgomery Fair department store where she worked as an assistant tailor, Mrs. Parks remained rooted to her seat when the driver of the bus she had taken home asked her to stand. The seat she was told to surrender to a White man was actually in the first row of the "colored section" of the bus. The White section was full, and, as was customary, Blacks were expected to give up their seats when White passengers boarded.
>
> Mrs. Parks was arrested for failure to comply with the city ordinance and fined $14. When E. D. Nixon, head of the state chapter of the NAACP, and her husband, Raymond Parks, came to bail her out, it was decided that this incident presented the perfect catalyst to launch a boycott of the public transportation system in Montgomery.

The author may have had personal experiences with segregation, but this writing does not recount those experiences or her opinions. Instead, Brown describes the circumstances that led to Parks's arrest and to the Montgomery bus boycott. Brown's writing is accurate, objective, clear, and specific—it's informative.

Writing to Persuade

Persuasive writing has its emphasis on the reader, not on the writer or the topic. Its purpose is to make the reader look at an issue differently or act in a particular way. Every element of persuasive writing—words, sentence structure, organization, examples—is specifically geared toward the reader. And writing to persuade can take many forms—advertisements, political cartoons, editorials, law reforms.

Writing to Inform
Peer Response Questions

Once you have written an informative draft, you can use the following questions to help evaluate your own work. You can also use the questions to guide your comments on a classmate's paper.

For the Writer

1. If you had only twenty-four hours to work on this paper, what changes would you make?
2. What questions do you have about your paper? Where would you like the group to focus its attention? Where do you feel you need the most direction?

For the Reader

1. Describe how the writer informs. Where does the writer report information; explain a concept; or describe an object, person, or situation?
2. Whom is the writer informing? Is the information geared for that audience? What other questions might that audience have that the writer has yet to anticipate or address?
3. Is the reporting complete and accurate? Where does the writer rely on statistics, opinions, examples, or authorities? Why is or why is this not effective?
4. Describe the type of knowledge the writer uses to inform. Does the writer use personal, indirect, researched knowledge or a combination? What is the most effective and why?
5. Has the writer provided an unbiased presentation? Where is there evidence of bias? Where is there evidence of objective presentation? How could the writer revise the biased elements?
6. Describe how the writer uses clear, specific examples and explanations.
7. Where do you get confused? Where do you want to know more? Know less?
8. Where do you think the writer has informed his or her audience or has written particularly well?
9. If this were your paper, what would you add? Delete?

When you write to persuade, you use one or a combination of three basic strategies: you use *reasoning* based on facts and statistics to move readers intellectually, you use *emotions* to make readers feel something strongly, or you use *values* to motivate readers with their sense of right and wrong.

Writing to Persuade

Characteristics	*Examples*
Influence readers' beliefs and actions	Advertisement
	Political speech
Appeal to readers' reason, emotions, or values	Sermon
	Editorial

One example of writing that persuades is a leaflet that was printed on the night of Rosa Parks's arrest. The leaflet called for a one-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system. The boycott lasted thirteen months.

> Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grownups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses Monday.

In this paragraph the writers use all three strategies of persuasive writing. First, they use *reasoning*. They state the facts of Parks's arrest and the earlier arrest of another woman, Claudette Colvin. They use *emotions*—in this case, fear—by suggesting that "the next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother." And finally, the writers use *values* to persuade their readers that segregation is not right: "This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights too." When you write to persuade,

you focus on your readers to influence their thinking or their actions by appealing to their intellect, their emotions, or their values.

Writing to Speculate

When you write to speculate, you are examining possibilities in the past, present, or future. You ask, What if . . . ? or What about . . . ? with regard to an issue or an idea. When you write to speculate, you use your imagination. Obviously, you can only guess how things would have turned out differently if the past or present could be changed, or what the future holds. But your speculations must be rooted in scientific evidence or human experience. You should be able to support what you're saying.

Writing to Speculate

Characteristics	*Examples*
Discuss past, present, and future possibilities	Proposal
Ask, What if . . . ? or What about . . . ?	Hypothetical situation or possibility
	Alternatives

An example of writing to speculate comes from Dr. Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. He delivered the speech on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In it, King talks about a world of peace, justice, and love.

> I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."
>
> I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering[1] with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.
>
> I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by

[1] **sweltering:** suffering from oppressive heat

Writing to Persuade
Peer Response Questions

Once you have written a persuasive draft, you can use the following questions to help evaluate your own work. You can also use the questions to guide your comments on a classmate's paper.

For the Writer

1. If you had twenty-four more hours to work on this paper, what changes would you make?
2. What questions do you have about your paper? Where would you like the group to focus its attention? Where do you feel you need the most direction?

For the Reader

1. Write a single, concise statement that accurately reflects the writer's position. (Be careful not to present your position—only the writer's position.) Where does the writer use a formal thesis statement or controlling idea to state that position?
2. Where does the writer use examples, statistics, scenarios, case studies, or authorities to convince you that his or her position is valid? Where does the writer need more specific support?
3. Does the writer explain other points of view that don't support her or his position? Where does the writer acknowledge other points of view? Has the writer acknowledged your own point of view? If not, what does the writer need to do?
4. Does the writer restate the primary reasons for his or her stance? Does this restatement show why this stance is desirable? Is this the best place in the paper for showing this stance? If not, where would you place it?
5. Where do you get confused? Where do you want to know more? Know less?
6. Where do you think the writer has used effective examples or has writter particularly well?
7. If this were your paper, what would you add? Delete?
8. Has the writer persuaded you to consider her or his position? Has your position changed at all?

> the content of their character. I have a dream . . . I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification,[2] one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

Notice that while King speculates on what the future holds, he keeps in touch with the past and the present by referring to racial injustice in Mississippi and Alabama.

The four aims of writing often overlap. Rarely do you write just to reflect or just to inform or just to persuade or just to speculate. But the principles behind these aims can help you understand more fully *why* and *how* you write what you do. They can help you decide how best to meet your needs and those of the reader, topic, and message.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Writing is a process. It doesn't simply appear on the page, and when it is on the page, it doesn't always say what you want it to say. When you read newspapers, magazines, and textbooks, you see finished pieces of writing. You don't see the author sitting alone; struggling to get ideas on paper; experimenting with different words and examples; and slowly developing an essay, an article, or a chapter.

Annie Dillard, a talented contemporary essayist, explains in her book *The Writing Life* (1989) that writing is hard work and that it takes time:

> It takes years to write a book—between two and ten years. . . . Out of a human population on earth of four and a half billion, perhaps twenty people can write a book in a year. Some people lift cars, too. Some people enter week-long sled-dog races, go over Niagara Falls in barrels, fly planes through the Arc de Triomphe. Some people feel no pain in childbirth. Some people eat cars. There is no call to take human extremes as norms.
>
> Writing a book, full time, takes between two and ten years. The long poem, John Berryman said, takes between five and ten years. Thomas Mann was a prodigy of production. Working full time, he wrote a page a day. That is 365 pages a year, for he did write every

[2] **interposition and nullification:** state and local authorities' disregard for federal laws that protect civil rights

Writing to Speculate
Peer Response Questions

Once you have written a speculative draft, you can use the following questions to help evaluate your own work. You can also use the questions to guide your comments on a classmate's paper.

For the Writer

1. If you had twenty-four more hours to work on this paper, what changes would you make?

2. What questions do you have about your paper? Where would you like the group to focus its attention? Where do you feel you need the most direction?

For the Reader

1. What position or claim does the writer make about a specific possibility?

2. What assumptions does the writer make about the issue? About the reader? Explain whether those assumptions are valid.

3. Where in the paper does the writer use reasons to encourage the reader to consider a specific possibility?

4. What types of evidence and knowledge does the writer draw upon? Is it personal, indirect, or researched knowledge? How does the evidence support the writer's position?

5. Describe any other issues or assumptions about this position that you feel the writer should consider before revising.

6. Where do you get confuesd? Where do you want to know more? Know less?

7. Where are places you think the writer has used effective examples or has written particularly well?

8. If this were your paper, what would you add? Delete?

> day—a good-sized book a year. At a page a day, he was one of the most prolific writers who ever lived. Flaubert wrote steadily, with only the usual, appalling strains. For twenty-five years he finished a big book every five to seven years. My guess is that full-time writers average a book every five years; seventy-three usable pages a year, or a usable fifth of a page a day. . . . On plenty of days the writer can write three or four pages, and on plenty of other days he concludes he must throw them away.

Dillard is not trying to frighten you. She wants you to know that writing is challenging, that words don't explode onto the page or monitor in polished form. Writing is a process, and the output at any stage of that process is going to be different from the output at the other stages. Moreover, the writing process is different for most people.

Prewriting is the planning stage of the writing process. In this stage you determine why you're writing, what you're going to write about, and how you're going to support your thesis. In the prewriting stage, you gather the information you are going to need as you write. The prewriting stage prepares you to begin the actual writing.

In the *drafting* stage, you begin to write words and examples on paper or to type them on a keyboard. People draft differently. A fortunate few are able to draft their ideas simply, effortlessly, and clearly. But most of us end up with a product in need of correction. That's OK. In the drafting stage you are supposed to put ideas and examples on paper without worrying about whether your writing is grammatically correct or well organized. A messy draft can be changed later in the writing process. Right now, you want to get the ideas from the prewriting stage onto paper or computer monitor.

Rewriting is the fix-it stage of the writing process, the point at which you examine the draft to determine what works well and what needs strengthening. In this stage you check that what you've written does what it's supposed to do (reflect, inform, persuade, speculate); addresses a specific audience; is organized logically; and expresses your thoughts clearly. Rewriting transforms the writer-based draft (written to get the writer's ideas on paper) to a reader-based draft (written to meet the reader's needs).

Editing is the polishing stage of the writing process. In this stage you check that sentences are grammatically sound, that words are spelled correctly, that punctuation is used correctly. Don't try to edit as you draft. If you're worrying about right and wrong, you may not get your ideas down—and that's the purpose of drafting. Editing is the final stage of the writing process. It's here that correctness counts.

The writing process doesn't always follow these stages in sequence. For instance, as you draft or rewrite, you may realize that an example doesn't work the way you'd like it to, so you go back to the prewriting stage to generate more ideas. Or in the prewriting stage, you may stop to look up a word in the dictionary, something usually done in the editing stage. Or while you're drafting, you may decide to rewrite a sentence before going on. Generally, however, the writing process moves progressively from prewriting to drafting, from drafting to rewriting, and from rewriting to editing.

Now, with a brief explanation of the communication triangle (writer, reader, topic, message), of the writing aims (to reflect, to inform, to persuade, to speculate), and of the writing process (prewriting, drafting, rewriting, editing), you are ready to begin your first writing assignment. You can do it. Good luck!