

Strategies for Beginning to Compose (Formulating)

1. Naming and Defining

The word or phrase you use to name a phenomenon is one of the most important writerly choices you can make. The name that you give a phenomenon characterizes and classifies it in a certain way, calling attention to certain of its characteristics and omitting others. When, for instance, we name alcoholism as a "disease," we are characterizing it in a way far different from other namings: alcoholism as a "sin" or a "bad habit" or a "drinking problem." The philosopher Susanne Langer once said that "the name was the vastest generative idea ever conceived," which is a way of recognizing that to name is to call a phenomenon into one kind of existence or another. To name is to conceive of a phenomenon, to delineate its shape, differentiated from other phenomena surrounding it.

When you are in the process of identifying, classifying, and naming the objects you are studying, you might pose these kinds of questions:

- "What terms could be used to identify the phenomenon you are examining or reading about?"
- "What term(s) would you use, and why?"
- "What terms might others use or have others used in the past to name the phenomenon, and why?"
- "Are the similarities or differences in the terms significant?"
- "How is our understanding or conception of the phenomenon altered or changed when it is labeled, termed, or named differently?"
- "Is the phenomenon named differently by different persons or communities?"
- "What is the significance or those differences?"

Names are one thing, but how they are used in specific pieces of writing is another. In other words, the meaning or definition of a word changes according to who uses it in what ways to which purposes. Some meanings and definitions are shared by communities; some tend toward personal significance; while still others are forged by writers to meet a specific need or desire to analyze, interpret, characterize, or classify the phenomenon at hand. Writers have the right to change and to manipulate meanings and definitions or important terms in their texts, but they also have the responsibility to articulate the new uses to which terms are being put and to determine how new meanings, suggestions, connotations, or definitions can be clarified for readers.

When you encounter the ways a writer has named certain phenomena, as a reader you have the responsibility to question such namings. You might pose questions such as:

- "Do you like the writer's names and definitions for things?" "Why or why not?"
- "Even if you like the namings, do you think they could benefit from being sharpened, with further differentiations made?"

A thorough discussion of why you do or do not find the ways a writer has named phenomena useful can become the substance of an entire essay.

2. Recognizing Context

Context is a term which refers both to anything which surrounds a particular phenomenon in the world and to any of the words and phrases which surround any element in a piece of writing. Every word in a piece of writing is potentially influenced by or cooperates with every other word in that discourse. Words don't stand alone in sentences; instead, they work together, are common laborers, in a sense, moving meaning forward through a piece of writing.

In addition to this discursive context, there is also the phenomenal or worldly context -- the host of historical, cultural, and rhetorical scenes in which people have made or are currently making meanings with certain terms. When identifying this context, one tries to recognize all of the linguistic and non-linguistic elements attendant to particular acts of speaking or writing, including personal, communal/public, and political dimensions.

When you want to acknowledge the interdependence of context with the particular phenomenon or language you are scrutinizing, you might ask yourself

- "Is this phenomenon/particular term/phrase/attitude/belief/theory part of some larger entity, and if so, what is that larger entity?"

Here, you will also be thinking about the relationship of parts to whole: isolate bits to larger "agendas," discrete particulars to "the bigger picture."

3. Acknowledging Relationships

When writers articulate a relationship between elements, they begin the processes of idea-making and concept-forming. Finding relationships allows us to discern pattern, form, function, and purpose. When we recognize the interdependence of a word and its context, we're casting a relationship of part to whole. Comparing and contrasting, the recognition of similarities and differences, is another way to seek relatedness. Here is a brief "checklist" of relationships you might seek between elements you have identified and named:

- "Is A the same as B?"
- "Does A belong to the same class as B?":
- "Is A beyond, behind, next to, inside, ahead of, before, etc. B?"
- "Is A the cause of or the effect of B?"
- "Is A a repetition of or a duplication of B?"
- "Is A an example of B?"
- "Is A comparable in some respects to B?"
- "Is A a part of B? Is A made up of B?"
- "Is A derived from B?"
- "Is A the opposite of (antithesis, antonym) B?"
- "Does A complete B? Does A depend on B?"
- "Is A necessary to the function of B?"
- "Is A a symptom of BP"

Other useful, generative relationships (sometimes called "oppositions") are these: small/great; close/distant; alive/dead; anterior/posterior; inclusion/omission; surface/depth; field/ground; central/peripheral; inside/outside; present/future; commonly assumed/closely analyzed; apparent/real; and general society/particular community. There are, of course, infinite

numbers of other oppositions that can be found.

Other relationships you might seek to understand and to analyze are those between cause and effect, expectation and outcome, intention and realization, or intended goal and actual result. Whenever you undertake to determine or to describe how something catalyzes, triggers, determines, leads to, or generates something else, you are investigating the relatedness of cause to effect. Here, you might consider such questions as:

- "How did this phenomenon/attitude happen?"
- "What caused it?"
- "How was it generated or created?"
- "What circumstances combined to cause it?"
- "Whose fault was it?"

4. Presenting a Narrative of Your Thinking

Writers often present readers a narrative or history of their thinking about a particular subject. This strategy can be used when you think it would be helpful for readers to understand a particular process of wondering, of exploration, of examination, or of analysis you have undertaken. Sometimes, essays represent the progress of a writer's thought to readers: "When I first began to think about X, I thought that _____, but as time went on (on closer inspection), it became clear to me that _____." Writers often present a sequence of questions, concerns, and speculations, carefully walking readers through an issue thought by thought, or leading readers to a new hunch or conclusion by representing the process and progress of their thought.

5. Locating and Deploying Keywords

It is often profitable to scan your notes or to re-examine something you have read, looking for keywords and key phrases. Keywords are words that do important conceptual work in your own and other writers, texts, are often wonderfully ambiguous (able to do various kinds of work in various discursive settings), and are often used across a wide range of public and personal contexts. It is often useful to recognize just how you want such important terms to be understood by your readers. When a keyword is present, a key idea is often close on its heels, or sometimes lies buried or half-hidden under the keyword's *illumination*. To help a keywords key idea become available to readers, you can ask yourself questions such as:

- "Should I differentiate my use and definition of the term from other uses and definitions?"
- "Should I explicitly recognize the ways other writers/thinkers have brought the term to *meaning* in their texts to distance my use from or to ally my use to theirs?"

Keywords can also be power terms or "master terms," particularly important to or frequently deployed by a certain person or a specific community. Often, when listed together, named and defined, they constitute what philosophers call a "noetic field," a particular "field of knowledge," constituted of language used by particular persons, in particular ways, for particular purposes. Envision the kinds of political and ideological purposes to which terms such as "family," "family values," "diversity," "lifestyle," and "community" have been put--especially in the public sphere.