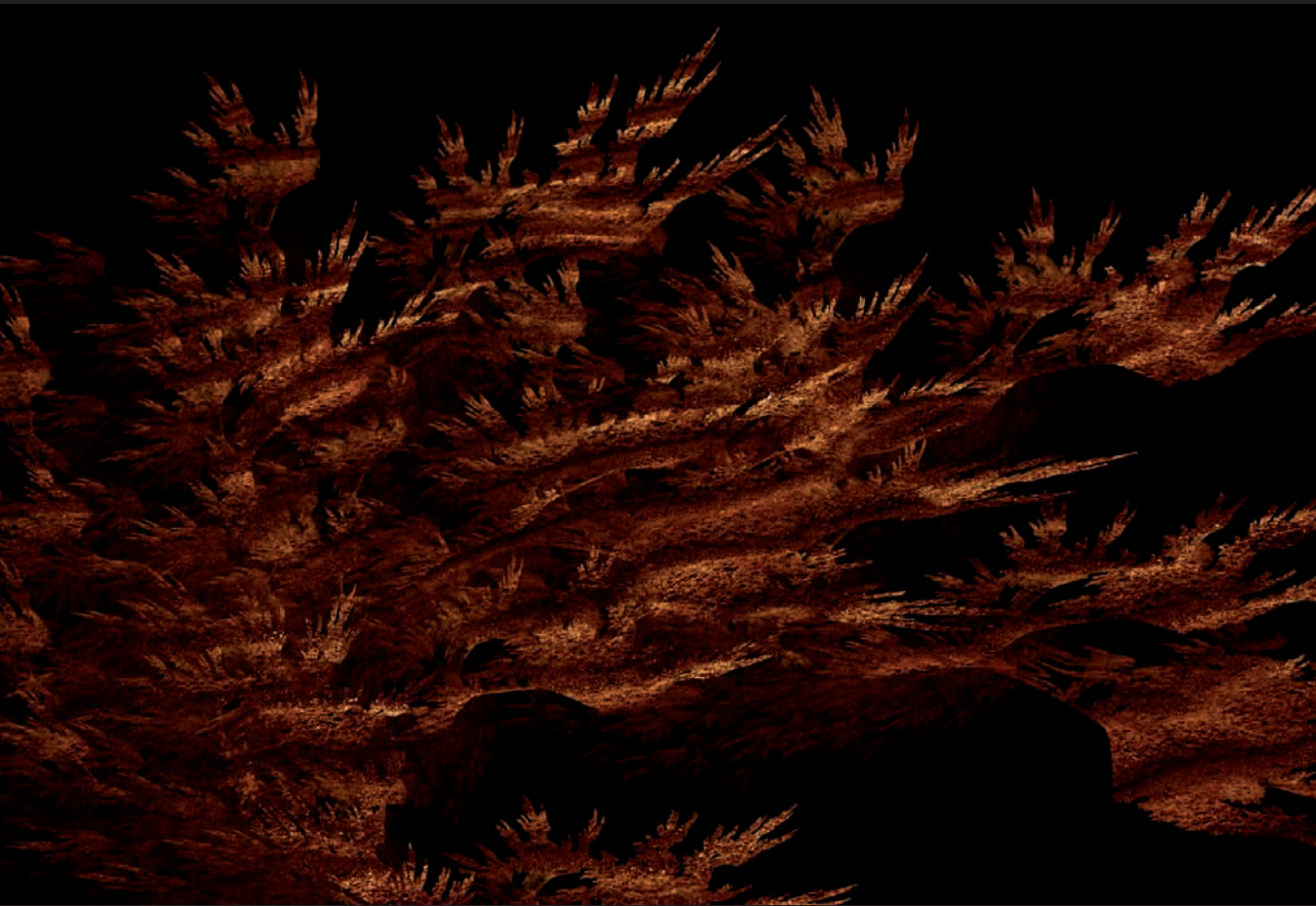


# REASON TO WRITE



GINA L. VALLIS

as one student reflected in a response to the assignment of coming up with a critical question:

Imagine sitting nervously in your first ever college writing class, fresh out of high school, and foreign to university-level teaching. Your professor begins to talk about your first ever homework assignment, one that will be due at the beginning of the next class. As she first presents the assignment it seems as though it will be a simple task that should take no longer than ten or fifteen minutes, but as she goes into greater detail, suddenly a challenge arises. The task is to come up with a critical question, which is defined by a certain criteria. Suddenly the ten or fifteen minutes that you planned on spending to come up with this question seems like an endless search for the perfect question, one that will yield intellectual thought, and a good grade, as well.

This was the exact situation that I found myself in, just a few weeks ago. The assignment flustered me so much that I came to the next class with no question written down, and not even the slightest clue of what my potential question would be. I began to think about this process of coming up with a question, and I asked myself: “Just what is it that makes this assignment so difficult?” The question in itself fit the criteria of a critical question.<sup>1</sup>

This student’s response is understandable. It bad enough not to “know the answer,” but it is even more unsettling not to “know the question.” In much of our understanding of what it is to be in a classroom, students who display this level of ignorance are usually students who are doing poorly. However, if a writer already knows the answer before writing, unless the writer does a great deal of pre-writing, it’s very likely that everyone else knows the answer, too.

In academic writing, this initial state of uncertainty is necessary. Writing is a unique activity that requires investment, and investment involves putting something on the line, in order to get something back. Richard E. Miller calls this initial state of uncertainty one of *discontinuity*:

Typically, a position—a thesis or argument—will remain fairly vague until we have done a great deal of preliminary writing. ...Discontinuities lead us to search for a shared horizon, and from this shared horizon our own questions come. Then, provided we are willing to push far enough, a coherent position begins to emerge, not all at once in a grand vision

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Townsend, Writing 1 Fall 2007. UCSB.

but cumulatively, with one insight building on the next. At some point, all these insights begin to cohere, we recognize the directions of our thoughts, a direction that writing itself has revealed. We write and then we see where our writing has taken us. Only then are we in a position to convey our discoveries to others in a well-crafted presentation. (xvii)

In other words, there's no way to offer students a pre-mixed "formula" for thinking, and writing is linked to thinking. An instructor can only endeavor to provide the best map, the best tools, and the best guard-rail for the tricky bits. The critical question is the first step.

When asked to come up with a critical question, students often feel daunted, because they know that there is specialized knowledge out there that people have been studying for years. For example, a writer would need specialized knowledge within a given field to ask the question:

If the Second Law of Thermodynamics introduces the concept of friction, to what degree would reducing the relative mass of an object decrease entropic forces?

...OR...

How does the pictographic quality of sign language usage impact upon Ferdinand de Saussure's rejection of the onomatopoeic quality of words in his postulation of the arbitrariness of the sign?

No doubt about it—academics get interested in strange topics. However, the thing that divides "students" from "scholars" is not class standing (freshmen vs. senior, or undergraduate vs. graduate student), or even whether a writer has, or doesn't have, an advanced degree.

Rather, it is that students tend to assume that all the answers are already out there. In other words, they assume that the conversation is over, and they're just showing up to "listen in" to the record. Scholars tend to know that the conversation is still open, and any good question can lead to a new way of looking at something, and therefore can produce new knowledge in any given field.

Specialized knowledge gives a writer an edge, because the writer knows the terminology, and can move confidently through the writing that has been done in that field, by other thinkers. However, nobody can write critically merely based upon the accumulation of specialized knowledge, because he or she would merely be repeating known information. A person with specialized knowledge, but without curiosity,

or the ability to make critical leaps between kinds of information, cannot create new knowledge. He or she is merely a walking encyclopedia. We have computers and libraries for that kind of storage.

A person who is curious, but who may not yet have a huge amount of specialized knowledge, has all the makings of a critical writer. A writer does not have to have a Mathematics Ph.D. to wonder about the paradox of the concept of zero. A writer does not have to have a Sociolinguistics Ph.D. to wonder how and why the word “ghetto” has moved from a noun to an adjective. A writer does not have to have a Ph.D. in Political Science or Geography to wonder about how topography affects politics in the Middle East. A writer does not have to have a Ph.D. in Media Studies to wonder how and why television animation has moved from children’s entertainment to adult social satire. A writer does not have to have a Ph.D. in Anthropology to wonder how the Internet has changed how we think about our identities within groups.

In responding to the difficulty in producing a critical question, this student illustrated one of the benefits of the critical question. He became genuinely curious about why coming up with a critical question was so difficult, and concluded his response, at the end of the course, with a level of honesty in his writing that was missing from what he initially perceived as a “copout” for the work:

When the time came for me to present my critical question, I received laughs for questioning the actual assignment in itself. I, myself, did not see the question as being a very good one until I began writing the actual paper.

However, I was able to understand for myself a question that at first did not make sense to me. Through analyzing the idea of critical thinking and critical questions, I was able to attain this skill for myself, and gain a better understanding of why it can be difficult for people to do.

By no means is thinking critically easy to do, and it is, from my own experience, one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. It involves a long thought process that not only challenges an individual to see the other side of an argument, but to question assumptions and beliefs. Critical thinking is not just an approach to finding answers to difficult questions, but also a method of retaining one’s individuality.

The last statement in this response not only demonstrates the way in which this student answered the question, but the manner in which his exploration of the issue extended his own understanding of his role as a student in the university, as a participant.

The purpose of this book is, in part, to help you to rehearse how you would work from a question, through an analysis, to an answer, on paper, for a reader. This process provides generalized skills that are applicable in both the public and private sector, in all academic fields of specialization, as well as in professional life.

The more you look at the world critically, the more you will notice; the more you notice, the more you will question what you see; the more you question what you see, the better you will become at producing answers about the world, and join in the conversation that furthers our knowledge of it.

In other words, if you can do it here, you can do it there.

## 8 REVIEW

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### CHAPTER REVIEW

The information to take from this chapter is that there are different ways of creating knowledge. The questions that we ask help, in part, to determine the answers that we receive. Critical thinking is not about generating answers. Rather, it's about paying attention to the way in which one questions in order to get to an answer. Doing so requires intellectual self-regulation, which can become a habit-of-mind that one develops, and that can be applied to other contexts.

### GRAMMAR REVIEW

#### Signal Phrase

A “signal phrase” is a way for you to indicate the person/s from whom you are quoting, instead of just putting that person's name in a citation or footnote. It's often required, and even if it was not, it's the polite thing to do. Your reader will appreciate it, because she or he may recognize the name of the other writer, and better understand your use of the quotation.

### VOCABULARY REVIEW

#### **cognitive bias**

From cognitive science, refers to the many ways in which our chain of thinking can become flawed, and lead to erroneous conclusions, actions, and decisions

**ideology**

This is a difficult term that is used in a variety of ways in different disciplines and by different theorists. For our purposes, it indicates the shared worldview that gives order or structure or meaning to the communication in which we engage, because we share a common social group or a common language. This ideology is often a source of cognitive bias

**epistemology**

Closely related to critical thinking, refers to a branch of knowledge that studies knowledge itself: the history of knowledge, how we produce it, what pressures to which it is subject, who has control over that production, and how it affects people's perceptions over time

**existent**

From philosophy, this simply means that producing knowledge is a human activity—the “real world” doesn't particularly care, nor is it affected, except to the degree that we apply that knowledge (e.g.: the production of fossil fuels). In other words, we are the ones who wonder, and experience, and speculate, and question. In doing so, we engage in an activity alongside the world, not with it. We record our means of understanding and experiencing the world. We do not record the world, itself

**narrative drive**

One of the strange things about people is our ability to get excited about things that not only don't exist, but that we know don't exist—like fictional characters. People love them, or hate them, or cheer for them, or mourn for them

Our ability to do so has to do with empathy and imagination. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in the position of another, and feel emotionally invested. It's an important part of being human. If one couldn't empathize, one not only wouldn't care if Romeo jumped off a cliff in the middle of the play, one probably wouldn't care if a real person jumped off of a cliff

A good portion of the human brain is devoted to empathy—that's why people are social. That's also why people without empathy are called sociopaths

Narrative drive is the emotion we experience when our empathy is engaged through a process of plot production, which involves putting someone or something (a person, a character, a country, an animal, a tree—we're pretty versatile) into conflict, and then briefly withholding the resolution of that conflict

That's what gets us to the theater, to the sports arena, and to the newscast

## 9 THE CRITICAL QUESTION

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### STEP 1: CRITICAL QUESTION GUIDE

For the first step, write a Critical Question:

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Make sure that this question follows the eight critical question guidelines listed below. Check each one. If the question does not fit a guideline, find a way to revise it, or choose a new question.

Guideline	True
	✓
1. The question is not a question that can be answered by “yes” or “no”	_____
2. The question does not have the word “should,” nor is it phrased as a “should” question	_____
3. The question may be one around which you have some ideas, but it is not a question to which you already have the answer	_____
4. The question is not a question that someone else has already answered in the same way, or that requires extensive secondary sources, or an advanced degree, to answer	_____
5. The question does not require you to generalize groups of people, as in “Men like sports”	_____
6. The question does not require you to “speak for others.” A good way to check this is to ask yourself if the only reasonable answer is: “It depends upon whom you ask”	_____
7. The question should be as specific as you can make it, because general questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” would probably not be something you could answer comprehensively within the length of an essay	_____
8. The question should not require you to imagine future events	_____

## SAMPLE CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- How is fashion a medium of communication?
- How have two political parties in the United States generated “packaged” values?
- What is the tension between truth, falsehood, and art, in photography?
- How do public spaces structure human experience?
- What determines the details that are “left out” of a given historical narrative?
- What kind of identity stakes are involved in online gaming?
- What are the consequences of the new positioning of the university as a transition between high school and work?
- How has the web changed the possibilities for accessing, owning, and exchanging information?
- What are the similarities and differences between health, fitness, and beauty?
- How did the “culture wars” change the face of democracy and debate in U.S. discourse?
- In what ways has the image of the vampire in popular culture become romantic, moving into the teen-pic flick genre?
- How much of human perceptual experience is attention-based, and how much is spent in a state of distraction?
- What is the history of persuasive strategies used within the “anti-drug” campaign in the United States?
- How do theme parks structure experience, and what message does that experience provide?
- When a celebrity’s life is given the status of “real news,” what does this say about a kind of national “gossip”?
- What is the current popular image of Christianity in the U.S.?
- In what way is there a double standard for male and female promiscuity?



- How does the image of American individuality conflict with action directed toward the common good?
- How are new forms of political expression used for profit, and then exhausted?
- What is the nature of the fan's "fanatical" investment in sports in the U.S.?
- How do styles of music generate social groupings and self-identity?
- What is behind various representations of the "end-of-the-world," from Y2K to 2012?
- What appeals do recruitment posters, for different branches of the military, make in the United States?
- To what degree is our identity shaped by the roles that we play?
- What is the role of metaphor, illustration, and/or photography in scientific or legal or historical discourse?
- What is the shift, in sports, between direct engagement in the activity, and spectatorship?
- What is the nature of the division between logic and faith, and what role might faith play in logic, and logic in faith?
- In what ways is "multiculturalism" a description of American culture, and in what ways is it a description of an individual's experience within that culture?
- Why do our love stories in popular film often end at the altar?
- Why are toys often gendered, and what does this say about the training of people in regard to gender roles?
- What factors go into determining the gender/age of a given voiceover for a product in a TV commercial?



# CHAPTER 3

## QUESTIONS IN CONTEXT

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“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll

*Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*

## 1 REVISING FIVE WRITING RULES

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“Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge”

—Kahlil Gibran

General writing rules are often designed to accompany a formula for writing the essay. In this section, you will have the opportunity to examine five typical writing rules, how they are designed to help, and how they might be reoriented toward developing skills toward critical thinking and writing.

Students are often told that academic writing:

- Is for the purpose of winning an argument
- Is where one should express one’s opinion
- Involves agreeing or disagreeing on a topic
- Involves the writer choosing a topic of interest
- Tells the reader what we “should” do

In relationship to academic writing, these directions are like having assembly instructions that are almost helpful, yet somehow fit neither the parts provided, nor the nature of the final product. Each rule forces the writer to think a certain way, and therefore to write a certain way. It is helpful to examine the way in which these rules constrain the possibility of the way that writers think through a given issue, and to examine how to revise the rule so that writers can work through a question in the process of academic inquiry.

### **THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIC WRITING IS TO WIN AN ARGUMENT**

The idea that, in a paper, one is to argue that one is “right,” at all costs, is based upon a model of adversarial debate. While academic writers often respond to other writers, an academic article is not an editorial or a speech, and rarely adopts an adversarial tone. As such, there are several ways in which this rule gets in the way of quality academic prose:

- Writers become more concerned with defense of a statement than curiosity about what is so
- Writers tend to ignore any information that does not support winning the argument, which impedes honesty
- Writers will tend to polarize a complex issue in order to take a “side”

When you write in academics, you have an obligation to your reader to be honest, and to fully explore an idea. There is a difference between winning or losing an argument, and persuading an audience through honest inquiry.

Most readers can sense very quickly if a writer is more invested in being “right” than in telling the truth. Readers are persuaded by writers:

- Who are invested, but reasonable
- Who are careful and honest
- Who are fair, and look at all sides to an issue
- Who take other points of view into account
- Who endeavor to be of service to their readers

In other words, readers are best served by writers who can be trusted not to sacrifice intellectual and personal integrity for the sake of “winning” a one-sided argument on paper, just to prove that he or she can do so.