Exploratory Essay
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Exploring Exploratory Writing

Through our work in writing centers, we often encounter students disappointed with their grades on essay exams or papers. "I worked hard on this paper," they tell us, "but I still got a lousy grade. What am I doing wrong? What do college professors want?"

To help you answer this question, consider the following two essays written for a freshman placement examination in composition at the University of Pittsburgh, in response to the following assignment:

Describe a time when you did something you felt to be creative. Then, on the basis of the incident you have described, go on to draw some general conclusions about "creativity."

How would you describe the differences in thinking exhibited by the two writers? Which essay do you think professors rated higher?

ESSAY A

I am very interested in music, and I try to be creative in my interpretation of music. While in high school, I was a member of a jazz ensemble. The members of the ensemble were given chances to improvise and be creative in various songs. I feel that this was a great experience for me, as well as the other members. I was proud to know that I could use my imagination and feelings to create music other than what was written.

Creativity to me means being free to express yourself in a way that is unique to you, not having to conform to certain rules and guidelines. Music is only one of the many areas in which people are given opportunities to show their creativity. Sculpting, carving, building, art, and acting are just a few more areas where people can show their creativity.

Through my music I conveyed feelings and thoughts which were important to me. Music was my means of showing creativity. In whatever form creativity takes, whether it be music, art, or science, it is an important aspect of our lives because it enables us to be individuals.
ESSAY B

Throughout my life, I have been interested and intrigued by music. My mother has often told me of the times, before I went to school, when I would “conduct” the orchestra on her records. I continued to listen to music and eventually started to play the guitar and the clarinet. Finally, at about the age of twelve, I started to sit down and try to write songs. Even though my instrumental skills were far from my own high standards, I would spend much of my spare time during the day with a guitar around my neck, trying to produce a piece of music.

Each of these sessions, as I remember them, had a rather set format. I would sit in my bedroom, strumming different combinations of the five or six chords I could play, until I heard a series which sounded particularly good to me. After this, I set the music to a suitable rhythm (usually dependent on my mood at the time), and ran through the tune until I could play it fairly easily. Only after this section was complete did I go on to writing lyrics, which generally followed along the lines of the current popular songs on the radio.

At the time of the writing, I felt that my songs were, in themselves, an original creation of my own; that is, I, alone, made them. However, I now see that, in this sense of the word, I was not creative. The songs themselves seem to be an oversimplified form of the music I listened to at the time.

In a more fitting sense, however, I was being creative. Since I did not purposely copy my favorite songs, I was, effectively, originating my songs from my own “process of creativity.” To achieve my goal, I needed what a composer would call “inspiration” for my piece. In this case the inspiration was the current hit on the radio. Perhaps, with my present point of view, I feel that I used too much “inspiration” in my songs, but, at the time, I did not.

Creativity, therefore, is a process which, in my case, involved a certain series of “small creations” if you like. As well, it is something the appreciation of which varies with one’s point of view, that point of view being set by the person’s experience, tastes, and his own personal view of creativity. The less experienced tend to allow for less originality, while the more experienced demand real originality to classify something a “creation.” Either way, a term as abstract as this is perfectly correct, and open to interpretation.

Working as a whole class or in small groups, analyze the differences between Essay A and Essay B. What might cause college professors to rate one essay higher than the other? What would the writer of the weaker essay have to do to produce an essay more like the stronger?

Understanding Exploratory Writing

The essential move for exploratory thinking and writing is to keep a problem alive through consideration of multiple solutions or points of view. The thinker identifies a problem, considers a possible solution or point of view, explores its strengths and weaknesses, and then moves on to consider another possible solution or viewpoint. The thinker resists closure—that is, resists settling too soon on a thesis.

To show a mind at work examining multiple solutions, let’s return to the two student essays you examined in the previous exploratory activity (p. 176). The fundamental difference between Essay A and Essay B is that the writer of Essay B treats the concept of “creativity” as a true problem. Note that the writer of Essay A is satisfied with his or her initial definition:

Creativity to me means being free to express yourself in a way that is unique to you, not having to conform to certain rules and guidelines.
The writer of Essay B, however, is not satisfied with his or her first answer and uses the essay to think through the problem. This writer remembers an early creative experience—composing songs as a twelve-year-old:

At the time of the writing, I felt that my songs were, in themselves, an original creation of my own; that is, I, alone, made them. However, I now see that, in this sense of the word, I was not creative. The songs themselves seem to be an oversimplified form of the music I listened to at the time.

This writer distinguishes between two points of view: “On the one hand, I used to think x, but now, in retrospect, I think y.” This move forces the writer to go beyond the initial answer to think of alternatives.

The key to effective exploratory writing is to create a tension between alternative views. When you start out, you might not know where your thinking process will end up; at the outset you might not have formulated an opposing, counteracting, or alternative view. Using a statement such as “I used to think ..., but now I think” or “Part of me thinks this ..., but another part thinks that ...” forces you to find something additional to say; writing then becomes a process of inquiry and discovery.

The second writer’s dissatisfaction with the initial answer initiates a dialectic process that plays one idea against another, creating a generative tension. In contrast, the writer of Essay A offers no alternative to his or her definition of creativity. This writer presents no specific illustrations of creative activity (such as the specific details in Essay B about strumming the guitar) but presents merely space-filling abstractions (“Sculpting, carving, building, art, and acting are just a few more areas where people can show their creativity”). The writer of Essay B scores a higher grade, not because the essay creates a brilliant (or even particularly clear) explanation of creativity; rather, the writer is rewarded for thinking about the problem dialectically.

We use the term dialectic to mean a thinking process often associated with the German philosopher Hegel, who said that each thesis (“My act was creative”) gives rise to an antithesis (“My act was not creative”) and that the clash of these opposing perspectives leads thinkers to develop a synthesis that incorporates some features of both theses (“My act was a series of ‘small creations’”). You initiate dialectic thinking any time you play Elbow’s believing and doubting game or use other strategies to place alternative possibilities side by side.

Essay B’s writer uses a dialectic thinking strategy that we might characterize as follows:

1. Sees the assigned question as a genuine problem worth puzzling over.
2. Considers alternative views and plays them off against each other.
3. Looks at specific examples and illustrations.
4. Continues the thinking process in search of some sort of resolution or synthesis of the alternative views.
5. Incorporates the stages of this dialectic process into the essay.

These same dialectic thinking habits can be extended to research writing where the researcher’s goal is to find alternative points of view on the research question, to read sources rhetorically, to consider all the relevant evidence, to search for a resolution or synthesis of alternative views, and to use one’s own critical thinking to arrive at a thesis.
Keeping a Problem Open

1. Working individually, read each of the following questions and write out the first plausible answer that comes to your mind.
   - Why on average are males more attracted to video games than females? Are these games harmful to males?
   - Have online social networks such as MySpace or Facebook improved or harmed the lives of participants? Why?
   - The most popular magazines sold on college campuses are women's fashion and lifestyle magazines such as Glamour, Elle, and Cosmopolitan. Why do women buy these magazines? Are these magazines harmful?

2. As a whole class, take a poll to determine the most common first-response answers for each of the questions. Then explore other possible answers and points of view. The goal of your class discussion is to postulate and explore answers that go against the grain of or beyond the common answers. Try to push deeply into each question so that it becomes more complex and interesting than it may at first seem.

3. How would you use library and Internet research to deepen your exploration of these questions? Specifically, what keywords might you use in a database search? What databases would you use?

An Exploratory Essay

Choose a question, problem, or issue that genuinely perplexes you. At the beginning of your exploratory essay, explain why you are interested in this chosen problem, why the question is significant and worth exploring, and why you have been unable to reach a satisfactory answer. Then write a first-person, chronologically organized narrative account of your thinking process as you investigate your question through research, talking with others, and doing your own reflective thinking. Your research might involve reading articles or other sources assigned by your instructor, doing your own library or Internet research, or doing field research through interviews and observations. As you reflect on your research, you can also draw on your own memories and experiences. Your goal is to examine your question, problem, or issue from a variety of perspectives, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of different positions and points of view. By the end of your essay, you may or may not have reached a satisfactory solution to your problem. You will be rewarded for the quality of your exploration and thinking processes. In other words, your goal is not to answer your question but to report on the process of wrestling with it.
This assignment asks you to dwell on a problem—and not necessarily to solve that problem. Your problem may shift and evolve as your thinking progresses. What matters is that you are actively engaged with your problem and demonstrate why it is problematic.

**Generating and Exploring Ideas**

Your process of generating and exploring ideas is, in essence, the subject matter of your exploratory essay. This section will help you get started and keep going.

**Posing Your Initial Problem**

Your instructor may assign a specific problem to be investigated. If not, then your first step is to choose a question, problem, or issue that currently perplexes you. Perhaps a question is problematic for you because you haven't yet had a chance to study it (Should the United States turn to nuclear power for generating electricity? How can we keep children away from pornography on the Internet?). Maybe the available data seem conflicting or inconclusive (Should postmenopausal women take supplemental estrogen?). Or, possibly, the problem or issue draws you into an uncomfortable conflict of values (Should we legalize the sale of organs for transplant? Should the homeless mentally ill be placed involuntarily in state mental hospitals?).

The key to this assignment is to choose a question, problem, or issue that truly perplexes you. The more clearly readers sense your personal engagement with the problem, the more likely they are to be engaged by your writing. (Note: If your instructor pairs this assignment with a later one, be sure that your question is appropriate for the later assignment. Check with your instructor.)

Here are several exercises to help you think of ideas for this essay:

- Make a list of issues or problems that both interest and perplex you. Then choose two or three of your issues and freewrite about them for five minutes or so. Explore why you are interested in the problem and why it seems problematic to you. Use as your model James Gardiner's freewrite on page 33, which marked the origin of his exploratory paper for this chapter. Share your questions and your freewrites with friends and classmates because doing so often stimulates further thinking and discovery.
- If your exploratory essay is paired with a subsequent assignment, read the assignment to help you ask a question that fits the context of the final paper you will write.
- A particularly valuable kind of problem to explore for this assignment is a public controversy that might come to your attention through newspaper, television, or radio coverage; your reading of magazines or books; or personal experiences. Often such issues involve disagreements about facts and values that merit open-ended exploration. This assignment invites you to explore and clarify where you stand on such public issues as gay marriage, immigration, health care reform, ending the Iraq war, racial profiling, energy policies, and so forth. Make a list of currently debated public controversies that you
would like to explore. Use the following trigger question: “I don’t know where I stand on the issue of ________.” Share your list with classmates and friends.

Formulating a Starting Point

After you’ve chosen a problem or issue, you are ready to draft a first version of the introduction to your exploratory essay in which you identify the problem or issue you have chosen, show why you are interested in it and find it perplexing, and show its significance. You might start out with a sharp, clearly focused question (Should the United States build a fence between the United States and Mexico?). Often, however, formulating the question will turn out to be part of the process of writing the exploratory paper. Many writers don’t start with a single, focused question but rather with a whole cluster of related questions swimming in their heads. This practice is fine as long as you have a direction in which to move after the initial starting point. Even if you do start with a focused question, it is apt to evolve as your thinking progresses.

In the introduction to an exploratory essay, a writer explains his or her research question or starting-point problem. For example, James Gardiner opens his essay by noting the popularity of online social networks such as MySpace and Facebook and mentioning the shocked look of his friends when he tells them he doesn’t have a Facebook profile (see p. 191). He then introduces the questions he wants to investigate—why students are attracted to Facebook or MySpace, how students use the sites, and how their communication skills are being affected. Another student, Dylan Fujitani, opened his essay by explaining his shock when seeing a newspaper photograph of mutilated corpses hanging from a bridge in Falluja, Iraq. Later, he discovered that the bodies were not American soldiers but hired contractors. This experience gave rise to a number of issues he wanted to explore about mercenary soldiers under the general question, “Is the use of private contractors in military roles a good idea?”

Taking “Double-Entry” Research Notes

After you have formulated your starting point, you need to proceed with your research. To develop the kind of academic research skills you will need for success in college, you should take purposeful notes as you read, following the strategies explained under Skill 24 (on taking effective notes) in Part 4, “A Rhetorical Guide to Research.” Whereas novice researchers avoid taking notes and instead simply collect a file folder of photocopied or downloaded-and-printed articles, experienced researchers use note taking as a discipline to promote strong rhetorical reading. We recommend “double-entry” notes in which you have one section for summarizing key points, recording data, noting page numbers for useful quotations, and so forth, and another section for writing your own strong response to each source, explaining how it advanced your thinking, raised questions, or pulled you in one direction or another.
We also recommend that you keep your notes in a research journal or in separate computer files. What follows is James Gardiner's double-entry research notes for one of the articles he used in his exploratory essay. When you read his full essay in Chapter 23, you'll be able to see how he used this article at a crucial place in his research.

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<th>Reading Notes</th>
<th>Strong Response Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Begins with Danah Boyd, an expert on OSNs. Talks about how she enjoyed Internet connections when she was growing up. Says the Internet “could change the way all of us order our world, interact with each other, get information and do business.” (p. 1 of printout) Two-page section on history of OSNs beginning with Friendster.</td>
<td>—I want to find out more about Danah Boyd. —good quote</td>
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<td>Returns to profile of Boyd. Boyd compares MySpace to an “electronic version of the local mall” (p. 2). She claims that these public spaces are no longer available so kids have gone virtual.</td>
<td>—I don’t think I agree with this; kids still hang out at malls.</td>
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<td>Quote from blogger Cory Doctorow on OSN messages as “simple grooming exercises” (p. 3)—not serious talk—just saying “hi” online.</td>
<td>— Quart good quote; I should use it.</td>
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<td>Paragraph on the “explosion of self-expression” on the sites—poems, songs, pictures, etc.—everyone trying to self-express creatively.</td>
<td>—very interesting; I should try to use it.</td>
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<td>Generational shift in attitudes toward privacy. Compares kids on OSNs trying to become celebrities like Paris Hilton (p. 3)— mentions Christine Dolce (AKA ForBiddeneN) as example of someone who achieved celebrity status.</td>
<td>—very important for my research question</td>
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<td>Quotes Boyd: OSNs are about “identity production”—kids are trying to “write themselves into being.” Quotes researcher Fred Stutzman about kids using OSN profiles like their bedroom walls—their private place where they can invite friends. They are “testing out identities.” (p. 4)</td>
<td>—I have another article by Stutzman; should read it soon. —great analogy</td>
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Reading Notes
—Has a section on online games; also has a section on how sociologists are doing interesting experiments seeing how news travels on OSNs.
—Raises some questions about dangers—stalkers—especially dangers to minors. How legislators are trying to come up with laws to make it harder for stalkers to find victims.
—Returns to Boyd, who says these dangers are “painfully overblown.” Boyd really supports OSNs as places where kids can “negotiate this new world.”
—Last part focuses on commercial aspects of OSNs; they apparently aren’t yet big moneymakers. Also if there is too much advertising, kids might not like the OSN as well.

Strong response summary:
Very useful article, not scholarly but fairly deep and well-researched. I can use it to give arguments in favor of Facebook, MySpace, or other OSNs. However, Danah Boyd doesn’t support OSNs in the same way that many other supporters do. Most supporters talk about how OSNs help young people enlarge their list of friends and have a feeling of connection, etc. Boyd is much more edgy and sees the dangers out there and all the role playing and phoniness. Boyd seems to like that unstable atmosphere where the rules and norms aren’t really clear. She thinks that the online world is really helping students learn to find their identities and discover who they are. I still have reservations, though. I like the parts of the article where Bowley talks about students wanting to become celebrities and competing with each other for the most friends because that seems like self-enhancement rather than making connections. Also Boyd doesn’t seem worried about all the time young people spend at these sites. I need to do more research into the downside of OSNs.

Strong Response Notes
—I don’t quite understand the experiments
—good for challenging OSNs and constructing alternative views
—important points; good longer quote on p. 5
—points make sense; might use them

Shaping and Drafting
Your exploratory essay records the history of your researching and thinking process (what you read or whom you talked to, how you responded, how your thinking evolved). Along the way you can make your narrative more colorful and grounded by including your strategies for tracking down sources, your conversations with friends, your late-night trips to a coffee shop, and so forth. What you will quickly discover about this exploratory assignment is that it forces you actually to do the research. Unless you conduct your research in a timely fashion, you won’t have any research process to write about.

Exploratory essays can be composed in two ways—what we might call the “real-time strategy” and the “retrospective strategy.”
# STRATEGIES

## for Composing an Exploratory Essay

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<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
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<td><strong>Real-time strategy.</strong> Compose the body of the essay during the actual process of researching and thinking.</td>
<td>Yields genuine immediacy—like a sequence of letters or e-mails sent home during a journey.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Retrospective strategy.</strong> Look back over your completed research notes and then compose the body of the essay.</td>
<td>Allows for more selection and shaping of details and yields a more artistically designed essay.</td>
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In either case, the goal when writing with an exploratory aim is to reproduce the research and thinking process, taking the readers on the same intellectual and emotional journey you have just traveled. The exploratory essay has the general organizational framework shown in Figure 8.1.

There are a number of keys to writing successful exploratory papers. As you draft, pay particular attention to the following:

- **Show how you chose sources purposefully and reflectively, rather than randomly.** As you make a transition from one source to the next, help your reader see your thought processes. Note the following examples of bridging passages that reveal the writer's purposeful selection of sources:

  For the next stage of my research, I wanted to explore in more detail what students actually did while online in an OSN. I located my next source by searching through the Academic Search complete database (from James Gardiner's essay, para. 8, p. 193).

  After reading Friedman's views of how globalization was changing lives in India and China, I realized that I needed to talk to some students from these countries, so I grabbed my backpack and headed to the International Student Center.

- **Give your draft both open-form and closed-form features.** Because your exploratory paper is a narrative, it follows an unfolding, open-form structure. Many of your paragraphs should open with chronological transitions such as “I started by reading,” “Early the next morning, I headed for the library to...” or “On the next day, I decided,” or “After finishing ... I next looked at. ...” At the same time, your summaries of your sources and your strong responses to them should be framed within closed-form structures with topic sentences and logical transitions: “This article, in raising objections to genetic screening of embryos, began changing my views about new advances in reproductive technology. Whereas before I felt ..., now I feel. ...”

- **Show yourself wrestling with ideas.** Readers want to see how your research stimulates your own thinking. Throughout, your paper should show you responding strongly to your sources. Here is a good example from James's paper on online social networks.
After considering the views of Boyd and Stutzman, I felt I understood why they think that OSNs give young people the opportunity for self-definition and self-expression. However, I still had doubts about the beneficial effects of OSNs. They still seem to me to send superficial messages about a person's identity. I found myself wondering if it is detrimental to spend all that time in virtual space rather than actually being with one's friends. I felt I needed to start looking for articles that examine the dangers of OSNs.

Although you might feel that sentences that show your mind talking its way through your research will sound too informal, they actually work well in exploratory essays to create interest and capture your critical thinking.
Revising

Because an exploratory essay describes the writer's research and thinking in chronological order, most writers have little trouble with organization. When they revise, their major concern is to improve their essay's interest level by keeping it focused and lively. Often drafts need to be pruned to remove extraneous details and keep the pace moving. Frequently, introductions can be made sharper, clearer, and more engaging. Peer reviewers can give you valuable feedback about the pace and interest level of an exploratory piece. They can also help you achieve the right balance between summarizing sources and showing the evolution of your own thinking. As you revise, make sure you use attributive tags and follow proper stylistic conventions for quotations and citations.

Questions for Peer Review

In addition to the generic peer review questions explained in Chapter 17, Skill 4, ask your peer reviewers to address these questions:

POISING THE PROBLEM:

1. In the introduction, how has the writer tried to show that the problem is interesting, significant, and problematic? How could the writer engage you more fully with the initial problem?

2. How does the writer provide cues that his/her purpose is to explore a question rather than argue a thesis? How might the opening section of the draft be improved?

NARRATING THE EXPLORATION:

3. Is the body of the paper organized chronologically so that you can see the development of the writer's thinking? Where does the writer provide chronological transitions?

4. Part of an exploratory essay involves summarizing the argument of each new research source. Where in this draft is a summary of a source particularly clear and well developed? Where are summary passages either undeveloped or unclear or too long? How could these passages be improved?

5. Another part of an exploratory paper involves the writer's strong response to each source. Where in this draft is there evidence of the writer's own critical thinking and questioning? Where are the writer's ideas particularly strong and effective? Where are the writer's own ideas undeveloped, unclear, or weak?

6. Has the writer done enough research to explore the problem? How would you describe the range and variety of sources that the writer has consulted? Where does the writer acknowledge how the kinds of sources shape his or her perspective on the subject? What additional ideas or perspectives do you think the writer should consider?