

# Contents

Brief Overview	ix
To the Instructor	xiii
A Framework for Critical Writing	xv
Main Features of the Book	xvi
To the Student: Before You Begin	xxix
Test It Out	xxx
A Few Things to Keep in Mind as You Work through This Book	xxxiv
Acknowledgments	xxxvii

## **CHAPTER 1** Thinking about Writing 1

Writing and Critical Writing	1
The Components of a Paper	4
Getting Familiar with the Components of a Paper: Extended Examples	8
Reflecting on the Process of Critical Writing	16
Adapting Critical Writing to Your Own Individuality	18
The Tasks That Lie Ahead	20
Writing for Clarity: SEE-I	21
A Framework for Critical Writing	27
Chapter 1: Practice and Assessment Exercises	29

## **CHAPTER 2** Beginning the Paper: The Elements of Reasoning 35

Introducing the Elements of Reasoning	35
The Elements of Reasoning	36
Getting a “Feel” for the Elements: Using the Elements to Understand a Topic	40

vi Contents

Thinking Your Way through a Topic: Analyzing “Around the Circle”	42
Examples in Practice	44
The Usefulness of the Elements of Reasoning	58
So What Is Critical Thinking?	61
Chapter 2: Practice and Assessment Exercises	62
Self-Assessment: Test It Out #1	69

### **CHAPTER 3** Constructing the Paper: Planning, Researching, Writing 73

Constructing the Paper Out of the Analysis: Thesis, Main Points, Structure, Outline	73
Going through the Process, Step-by-Step: An Example, with Commentary	77
Enhanced SEE-I: Developing Your Paper	84
Researching the Paper	87
Two Roles of Research in Planning and Writing a Paper	88
Doing Background Research	90
Doing Focused Research	92
Research and Critical Thinking	95
Writing and Pre-writing	98
Writing Better <i>and</i> Saving Time	99
Where Are You in the Process?	102
Chapter 3: Practice and Assessment Exercises	103
Self-Assessment: Test It Out #2	111

### **CHAPTER 4** Other Minds, Other Views: Addressing “the Other Side” and Cultivating Critical Thinking Traits of Mind 113

“The Other Side”	113
“Weakpoints”	115
Critical Thinking Traits of Mind	116

**Three Problems in Thinking about “the Other Side” 124**  
     Seeing “the Other Side” 125  
     Describing “the Other Side” Fairmindedly 134  
     Incorporating “the Other Side” into Your Paper 135

**The Order of the Writing Process 137**

**Chapter 4: Practice and Assessment Exercises 139**

**Self-Assessment: Test It Out #3 145**

**CHAPTER 5 Making the Paper Better:  
 Critical Thinking Standards and Socratic  
 Questioning 149**

**Revising the Paper: Making It Better 149**

**The Standards of Critical Thinking 150**

**How the Standards Help 154**

**Interventions: Enriching Your Paper with Socratic  
 Questioning 162**

**Making Socratic Questioning Interventions 164**  
     Socratic Questions 165

**Socratic Interventions in Practice: Extended Examples 168**

**Writing Longer Papers 176**

**Chapter 5: Practice and Assessment Exercises 177**

**CHAPTER 6 Making It Flow, Making It Complete:  
 Content, Audience, Communication, and  
 Criticality 185**

**Fundamental and Powerful Concepts 185**

**Making It Flow: Grammatical Issues 190**  
     How Grammar Works in Writing 190  
     Impediments to Writing Grammatically 192  
     Practical Guidelines 194

**Making It Complete 198**  
     Giving Credit 198  
     Taking It Seriously 202

**viii** Contents

The Larger Vision and Looking Ahead 210

**Chapter 6: Practice and Assessment Exercises 213**

Responses to Starred Practice and Assessment Exercises 219

Bibliography 243

Endnotes 245

Index 251

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# Critical Writing: A Guide to Writing a Paper

## Using the Concepts and Processes of Critical Thinking

### Brief Overview

“To the Instructor” introduces the main features of the book and the benefits that a robust approach to critical thinking brings to the enterprise of writing a paper. First, it briefly lays out for instructors the framework for critical writing that constitutes the structure of the book, and then, second, it highlights main features of the book, eleven of them. Pervading everything else is the intensive focus (and often the resulting insight) that critical thinking brings to writing. The Paul-Elder approach to critical thinking, unlike more piecemeal approaches, aims at being not only flexible but also *comprehensive*, which allows it to illuminate all aspects of writing papers in virtually any non-fiction genre.

The main features describe processes that allow students to engage critically with the fundamental tasks of writing a paper: getting an idea in the first place; analyzing a topic to generate a coherent plan for the paper, including a viable thesis statement and main points; writing the actual paragraphs; taking account of how others might disagree; using Socratic questioning and the standards for critical thinking to enrich and further develop the paper; cultivating the traits of mind that are so essential to writing papers that are both well reasoned and compelling; and internalizing the fundamental and powerful concepts—content, communication, audience, and criticality—that guide writing in any genre or kind of writing, including writing that takes place long after the course is over. Additional main features of the book include in-depth and extended examples of students planning, clarifying, and structuring a paper using the processes of critical writing; self-assessment exercises, with feedback, at the end of each chapter; and finally an elucidation of “the spirit of critical thinking” and of how it runs through and motivates the entire process of writing a paper using the concepts and processes of critical thinking.

“**To the Student**” provides three self-assessment pieces to help students make a realistic assessment of three far-ranging skills that are essential for writing something even moderately well. Later in the book, there are sections containing feedback on each of the three self-assessments. The concepts and processes of critical writing help dramatically in developing these and other crucial skills.

This section further provides reasons and motivations for a student to use the concepts and processes of critical thinking while writing a paper. It thus serves as a motivation for students to work through “To the Student” (and, more important, the book as a whole).

The emphasis in **Chapter 1** is on laying out the components of a paper. These components are fleshed out in two extended examples that show students constructing an actual plan for their papers. The students start off with an initially unfocused *topic*; they work their way to finding a *thesis statement* and then the *main points* that will constitute the *structure* and *outline* of their papers; they identify the *research* they will need to do; they *give credit* to the sources they will use, and, as they proceed, they *revise*. The plans in these examples are fairly strong ones, and in that sense they show good or careful thinking. Still, they do not contain the key features that characterize *critical* thinking: They do not carry the necessary emphasis on reflectiveness, on process, or the focus on standards. Even more pointedly, they don’t show *how* to do the actual thinking that will result in a well-thought-out paper.

Near the end, Chapter 1 outlines the systematic (but non-linear) framework for critical writing that will be developed in the succeeding chapters, a framework that focuses on a critical thinking approach to planning, writing, researching, and revising. It is this framework that shows the “*how*” of critical writing: it guides and focuses writers so that they can think through all the parts of constructing and writing a well-reasoned and compelling paper.

Chapter 1 also spells out a process for writing for clarity (one of the standards of critical thinking). The process—tagged “SEE-I”—is a structured way of writing the actual sentences and paragraphs of the paper directly from the critical thinking plan. SEE-I (*stating, elaborating, giving examples and illustrations*) provides a concrete way to engage in critical writing from the beginning of a course. SEE-I is amplified in Chapter 3 and substantially expanded in Chapter 5.

**Chapter 2** introduces the “elements of reasoning.” The eight “elements” are critical thinking concepts (such as *assumptions*,

*question at issue, conclusions, implications and consequences*) that allow the writer to analyze a topic with much greater depth, breadth, and clarity. The elements bring *focus*. Analyzing a topic “around the circle of elements” gives a person an effective, concrete procedure, one that generates the specificity that is essential for turning a vague topic into a crisp, well-defined, reasoned plan for a paper, one that is suitable for writing in virtually any non-fiction genre or kind of paper. The chapter contains three differently oriented examples of students analyzing a topic and thinking their way through it.

Each chapter (after the first) begins with a “GPS” showing the topics within the framework that will be highlighted in that chapter. A second, related GPS shows pervasive aspects of critical writing that will be specifically addressed in the individual chapter. (In the chapters, these traditional components and vocabulary of writing are given renewed vigor by the concepts and processes of critical thinking.)

#### GPS

- topic →
- analysis →
- plan: thesis, structure, outline →
- writing →
- “the other side” →
- improvement →
- flow

#### Pervasive aspects

- research
- critical thinking standards
- revision
- fundamental & powerful concepts
- giving credit

**Chapter 3** is on planning, researching, and writing the paper. It begins by showing students how they can straightforwardly use their analysis “around the circle of elements” to produce virtually a full critical thinking plan for the paper. Their analysis generates not only a focused thesis statement but also the other main points (and additional supporting points) that constitute the structure and outline of the paper. Chapter 3 also shows how the analysis generates a way to research a paper far more effectively. An extended example shows a student starting with an initially unpromisingly general topic—stereotyping—constructing a focused plan (thesis, main points), polishing it, revising it, reasoning through how to research it, and, finally, showing how the student can use the clarification process SEE-I to write the paper itself directly from the plan.

**Chapter 4**, “Other Minds, Other Views,” highlights two closely related facets of critical writing. First, being a critical thinker involves developing critical thinking “traits of mind,” such as *intellectual humility*, *intellectual empathy*, *fairmindedness*, and *intellectual integrity* (nine of them in all). Second, though these traits enter into all phases of critical writing, they come out in an especially pointed way in addressing “the other side” of an issue: how someone with a different point of view might reasonably see the topic in a different or conflicting way. The extended examples here bring back some of the examples from earlier chapters (such as the one on stereotyping) and show how considering the other side adds richness, fairness, and realistic thinking to a paper.

**Chapter 5** is devoted to making the paper better, to revising it. It begins with critical thinking *standards*—such as *clarity*, *accuracy*, *relevance* (ten of them in all). People invariably assume (or at least hope) that what they think or write is clear, relevant, accurate, important, and so forth. But focusing on the standards *explicitly*, *consciously*, brings with it a much more focused and effective way of thinking and writing. The standards come to the forefront in a highly specific and focused way in Socratic questioning, a way to address flaws and pitfalls, to sharpen things up, to limit or expand the writing, and to enhance pacing and coherence. Virtually any of the Socratic questions (see p. 165) are directly helpful in enabling writers, at any level of expertise, to enhance and expand their writing almost at will. The chapter contains several examples of students enriching their papers with Socratic questioning.

**Chapter 6**, on making the paper “flow,” highlights the “fundamental and powerful concepts” of critical writing: *content*, *audience*, *communication*, and *criticality*. The chapter shows how those four concepts allow someone to think through unanticipated difficulties that come up when writing papers (including issues that will inevitably come up long after courses are over). Specific writing issues addressed in Chapter 6 include some aspects of rhetoric, grammatical correctness, practical guidelines for writing, and giving credit to sources. The book ends with a section on taking writing seriously, engaging with what you write.

# To the Instructor

The main goal of *Critical Writing* is to provide students with a set of robust, integrated critical concepts and processes that will allow them to think through a topic, and then write about it, and to do so in a way that is built on, and permeated by, substantive critical thinking.

The critical thinking tools and concepts in the book are built on the Paul-Elder approach to critical thinking.\* A major advantage of the Paul-Elder approach is that, in contrast to other approaches to critical thinking, it aims to be *comprehensive*. By going through “the elements of reasoning” (see p. 36), you will be addressing *all* the major “parts of thinking.” In other approaches, you address some aspects of thinking but unintentionally leave others out entirely. Thus, with another approach you might identify, say, the *assumptions* someone is making or the *point of view* the person holds, but it may never come into your mind to examine how you are *interpreting* the issue, or the main *questions* you or the person should be asking about the issue, or the *implications and consequences* of it. Those are serious omissions: the key points you may need to address in your paper may well fall into categories that you overlook simply because nothing in these approaches draws your attention to them.

Saying that the Paul-Elder approach aims at being comprehensive does not mean that it is linear or step-by-step. It isn’t. (See the note on p. xvi.)

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\**Critical Writing: A Guide to Writing a Paper Using the Concepts and Processes of Critical Thinking* lays out the main dimensions of the Foundation for Critical Thinking’s articulation of critical thinking ([www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)) as they apply to writing. The approach was developed by Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and myself. Probably the best overview of it is contained in Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*, 8th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). Though Paul and Elder’s book is highly condensed, it spells out the essential components of a robust conception of critical thinking.

It also does not mean that using the elements is cold-bloodedly rational (with the negative overtones this word sometimes carries); addressing the elements gives great scope for imaginative thinking and writing. Finally, it also does not mean that it in any way guarantees success. The elements of reasoning direct you to what you need to address—but they don't guarantee that you will address it *accurately* or *clearly*, or that you will identify the most *important* responses, or that you will be as *precise* as you need to be.

The italicized words in the last sentence are four of “the standards of critical thinking” (see p. 151), and something roughly similar applies to them. The standards are not comprehensive in the way the elements of reasoning are—but they are close. The ten standards highlighted in this book—clear, accurate, relevant, important, logical, precise, deep, broad, sufficient and fair—are the ones that apply most often and in most circumstances.

One further note about the Paul-Elder approach is that, because of its comprehensiveness, it applies to all varieties of non-fiction writing. By contrast, other critical thinking approaches tend to be built on a tradition of informal logic, and as a result, they apply almost exclusively to writing argumentative (persuasive) papers, or papers that center on reacting to something read or viewed. That makes for a highly limited approach to writing. There are, of course, many different forms of non-fiction writing, and many of these are neither argumentative nor reactive. (This book contains several examples of these.) Students will write different kinds of papers not just in courses specifically centered on writing but also in courses in different disciplines. Moreover, once school is finished, most of the writing people do is not argumentative or reactive. A virtue of the framework in this book is that it lets you think your way through different kinds of papers and adapt your writing to them. Good thinking applies to writing *anything*.\*

A major part of the goal of the book is to provide not only the “what” of writing a paper but also the “how” of it. The “what” comprises the essential components of a well-thought-out paper: thesis statement and main points, an articulated structure, development, research, the need for clarity, grammatical correctness, and several others.

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\*This should be clear from the fact that *all* non-fiction modes or genres of writing have or embody assumptions, implications, concepts, questions at issue, and the other elements of reasoning; all rely on accuracy, clarity, relevance, and other critical thinking standards; all would benefit from traits such as intellectual perseverance and intellectual empathy; all can be enriched with Socratic questioning. (In a very different way, most of those apply even to writing many genres of fiction as well.)

Addressing the “how” of these occupies a significantly greater part of *Critical Writing*. The aim throughout is to show:

- how you can actually construct a thesis statement and the other main points that constitute the structure of the paper;
- how you can write the actual paragraphs that make up the body of the paper;
- how you can engage in productive research and do so in a planned, self-directed way;
- how you can make a point clear—not just grammatically or stylistically clear but also clear in thought and clear in communicating that thought to an audience;
- how you can think your way through the numerous unanticipated issues (including aspects of grammatical correctness, transitions, as well as many other aspects of rhetoric) that arise in the course of writing papers.

The book aims to provide close and careful processes for carrying out each of these, always through the use of one’s best reasoned judgment—through critical thinking.

A closely related goal in the book has to do with the *standards of critical thinking*, mentioned above. It is not enough simply to recognize that a well-thought-out paper needs to be clear, accurate, relevant, and so forth. With the critical thinking standards, the “how” is again paramount. *Critical Writing* provides concrete, usable ways for students to make their paper more accurate, more relevant, and so forth, and to communicate its accuracy, relevance, and the rest to the writers’ audience. Perhaps just as important, the book gives specific prompts that direct writers toward the thinking required to help them meet those standards.

The specific focus in the book is on writing a paper, but the concepts and processes of critical writing apply in a direct and useful way to virtually any kind of non-fictional writing.

## **A Framework for Critical Writing**

The central unifying concept in *Critical Writing* is a framework for creating, planning, structuring, researching, and writing a paper. The main components of the framework include the elements of reasoning, clarification and elaboration tools (called “SEE-I”), procedures for using intellectual empathy to address the other side of an issue, the standards for critical thinking, Socratic questioning techniques to enrich the paper, critical thinking character traits, and several others. The framework is intended to function as an organic

whole, with the parts of it integrated. But each of the components can work independently of the others, and instructors can incorporate any of them, wholly or in part, into their own ways of teaching writing. This approach yields considerable flexibility for both instructors and students. In addition, the extended examples in the book allow students to engage imaginatively with how someone might actually reason through crucial issues in writing.

Working through the concepts and processes in the book can have deep and far-reaching consequences for students. Some of the outcomes are immediate and dramatic, and some, because they allow students to experience the dynamism of the critical thinking concepts, lay a groundwork for helping students re-think and re-imagine the goals and rewards of writing well.

## Main Features of the Book

The main features of the book grow out of the techniques and goals inherent in critical writing.

First, **focus**. A crucial advantage of using a critical thinking framework in writing a paper is that it allows for a focused, incisive, informed analysis of a topic, question, problem, issue, situation, response to a reading—virtually anything. The framework begins with a critical thinking analysis of a topic using the “elements of reasoning”: *purpose, assumptions, implications and consequences, information, question at issue, conclusions and interpretations, concepts, points of view*—eight of them (each with several near synonyms), arranged in a circle. The elements of reasoning focus a person’s thinking. Analyzing a topic by “going around the circle of elements” both generates and guides critical thinking about the topic. It also generates and guides the purposeful research a person needs to engage in to write about a topic in a responsible way.

The elements give students a systematic (but non-linear\*) set of tools to analyze a topic using their best critical thinking. They help dramatically even if the topic is too general, or if it is as ill defined as initial topics so often are. Analyzing “around the circle” is not something students do only *after* they have found a focus for their paper. It is something they do to *find* that focus.

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\*Again, it is not a step-by-step method in which, for example, you first go through Step 1, then through Step 2, and so forth. It *can* be used that way, and this is often helpful for students who may need such a structure. But, in fact, the elements of reasoning can be used in any order, because reasoning itself does not exist in a given order. Often the problem or topic itself will suggest the most helpful elements to begin with.

Take a topic as unpromising as “college life.” As it stands, it is far too general to write a paper on. But when students analyze “college life” by going around the circle, it is almost as if the topic starts to focus itself. As they work through the main *purposes* of “college life,” the main *questions at issue* or *problems* that come up around it, the *assumptions* it embodies, the *concept* of what they mean by “college life” in the first place, and so on around the circle, they will be in a position not just to focus their thinking but usually to focus it to the point where they can generate a plan for the paper they will write.

The elements of reasoning bring a similar kind of focus to *research*. A dysfunctional concept of research often sidelines paper-writing for students. But with the elements as a guide, research and reasoning work together. Rather than research being just a haphazard process, analyzing around the circle helps students focus more exactly on what they need to research. The goal is for students to begin to see research not just as something to report on but as a major part of thinking through an issue or question in a way that is deeply informed by reliable sources, so they can then write about it with authority and insight.

The *process of focusing* is a major part of the learning and the understanding that is such a key factor in planning out a paper. It lays the groundwork for formulating a focused thesis statement, and also for identifying the main supporting points writers will structure their papers around.

Second, **planning out the paper as a whole: thesis statement, main points, structure, outline.** Analyzing a topic with the elements of reasoning puts students in a position to identify the main thing they will be saying in the paper, its thesis statement. Students’ thesis statements will very often emerge directly out of their analysis. As students analyze their topic (and do relevant research on it), they will be identifying one or more central *assumptions* within it; they will be finding and elucidating one or more major *implications* of it, and so on around the circle of eight elements. With that analysis in front of them, what usually happens is that they just “see” that their response to one or more of the elements *is* in fact the main thing they want to say in their paper. It *is* their thesis statement. (With my own students, about 60 percent of them just “see” the thesis statement among the responses they’ve written in their analysis, and that percentage grows dramatically as they begin to trust the process.) Though it may still need to be refined and polished, the thesis statement will often be right there in their analysis.

Even if it doesn't emerge directly in one or more of their responses, the framework provides a straightforward way for students to *construct* a focused thesis statement. They can do this by closely examining their responses to the elements and then choosing those responses that, in their best judgment, are the most important. They can then combine those responses, re-state them as a coherent whole, and thereby construct what is in effect a composite thesis statement.

In much the same way, the main points students need to explain or support their thesis statement will emerge from their analysis (or at least most of them will). Thus, by working their way through their topic, and using the eight elements of reasoning to guide them, there is a strong likelihood that students will have not just a viable thesis statement but the structure and outline of their paper as a whole. Creativity plays a strong role in this process: it is students themselves who are creating the content of their papers. When students work their way through their analysis in an engaged and genuine way, they will be in the best position to generate, out of their own informed critical and creative thinking, a reasoned plan for the whole paper.

An aside on **the vocabulary of writing**: This book uses a good deal of the traditional vocabulary of writing and composition courses: topic, thesis statement, main points, outline, and so forth. But it allows for using that vocabulary in a great variety of ways. Instructors may choose to use these terms in a carefully defined, restricted way or to use them, as the book tends to, in more flexible and far-ranging ways. Thus, for instance, in this book the term "topic" is used in the broadest possible sense. A topic can, of course, be a specific, already-focused issue the student is discussing or it can be a response the student has to an article the student has read and carefully summarized. But, far more flexibly, the topic in question can be virtually anything that can be written about: situations, problems, questions, arguments, decisions, and something simply wondered about are just some examples. "Topic" is extremely sensitive to context, to audience, and to the writer's goals, as well as to the role the writer sees that writing will play in her or his life after formal schooling is over. (The reason the term "topic" can be used so broadly, with so little initial focus, is that, as mentioned above, the focusing of the topic is accomplished by analyzing it with the elements of reasoning.)

Similarly, "thesis statement," as used in this book, is not a highly restrictive term. It is roughly just the main thing (or things) the writer is saying in the paper (though constructing a crisp, clear, interesting, imaginative, plausible thesis statement is a far more challenging matter: see the third main feature of the book). Even the term

“paper” itself does not have to apply only in a narrow sense. In fact, at the instructor’s discretion, short papers can be generated from the state-elaborate-exemplify-illustrate technique (SEE-I) described in Chapter 1.

Third, **reasoning and “getting an idea.”** The earlier point about *focus* is worth emphasizing. One of the frustrations of teaching critical writing is that students often just hope “to get” an idea for their paper. They often believe that the idea for the paper is just supposed to come to them, and that the main supporting points for that idea should also just come to them. Alternatively, they hope that reading something or doing some research will simply give them the idea for their paper.

One problem, of course, is that very often in fact no idea comes. Trying to come up with one by associational thinking (such as brainstorming or clustering) is typically too hit-or-miss to be reliable. Even after they have thought about a topic, say, or written a summary of something they have read or viewed, no idea may come to them, let alone a well-focused idea—and waiting for an idea to come is the opposite of a reasonable strategy. Moreover, without a *process* to analyze a topic critically, even if students do magically “get an idea,” it doesn’t carry over into getting an idea for the *next* paper they write. Getting an idea is often an unhappy and discouraging process for students.

But from a critical writing point of view, students need more than just a focused idea, more than just a well-circumscribed thesis statement, more than something that just comes magically to mind. They need a thesis that is *clear, accurate, relevant*, and as *deep* and *broad* as appropriate in that context. These are standards for critical thinking. Maybe the student’s idea will not in the end meet all those standards, but it has to be examined with enough care and attention for the writer to be able to say that, in her or his best judgment, it genuinely seems to meet those standards.

With a framework for critical writing, the ideas students use to structure their paper are the product not of what just happens to spring magically to mind but of their own best reasoning and research, prompted and guided by the central concepts of critical thinking.

Fourth, **other minds, other views.** Part of being a critical writer is seeing, acknowledging, and often describing how someone with a different point of view might see the issue in the paper differently. That is true whether the issue is a situation, argument, description, interpretation, report—really, anything the person is trying to figure out, understand, and write about.

Said another way: writers cannot really construct a well-thought-out critical paper without being aware of how their paper might go wrong. Part of being a critical writer is actively searching for how people with other points of view might see the issue or situation differently, noting what they might object to, or what they might see as seriously missing in the paper.

Often, this “other side” may need to be brought into the paper itself and addressed there with intellectual empathy and integrity. Addressing other minds and other points of view, honestly and in a forthright manner, is a key part of the framework in this book.

**Fifth, doing the actual writing: SEE-I.** Doing the writing itself, putting down the actual words, sentences, and paragraphs, is often a major challenge for students. In my college-level classes, for example, students sometimes have a point they want to make about an issue and they state that point in a sentence or two. But then they find themselves at a loss about how to say more. This is one kind of common problem, but there are many others: facing a blank screen, having a dysfunctional model of how to write (such as cutting-and-pasting), making actual paragraphs, “filling the pages” (i.e., expanding, but in a way that’s relevant), incorporating research (and citations), keeping their thinking and their writing authentic, creative and coherent—all of these problems and others present distinct challenges, and they often undermine students’ skills and motivation.

The framework helps with these problems in several ways. Perhaps the most direct way is through “SEE-I.” The acronym stands for *state*, *elaborate*, *exemplify*, and *illustrate*. SEE-I is a critical thinking technique for clarifying something, and it serves as a major mechanism for writing actual paragraphs and developing the paper.

If I’m a student, I can use SEE-I again and again. I take each important point in my paper and *state* it: crisply, concisely, in a sentence or two. Then I *elaborate* on it, explaining it at greater length, in a paragraph or two. Then I give an *example* of it—a good example—spelling it out in as much detail as is appropriate. Then I can give an *illustration*: a metaphor or simile, an analogy, a comparison, a picture-in-words, something to convey my point to my readers as vividly and clearly as I can. As I continue through with SEE-I, my paper itself is building, expanding in a way directly relevant to the thesis and structure of my paper.

Also, though, I continue developing my paper by “staircasing SEE-I”: I use it to clarify, expand and make vivid not just major points themselves but any important aspects of those major points as well. So, to take a schematic case, one of the main points in my paper

might be “The only humane way to address the problem of feral cats is to neuter or spay them and then set them free.” In accord with the critical writing framework, I start the writing by giving an SEE-I for that statement itself. But, in addition, I can staircase the SEE-I. That is, I can look within the statement, focus on the concept of “humane,” and give an SEE-I for *it*. I can state what it means to be *humane*, elaborate on what makes a practice humane or inhumane, give an example (perhaps more than one) of different kinds of humane treatments, and come up with an illustration that conveys what I mean by describing a treatment as “humane.”

I can continue staircasing by giving an SEE-I for what the *problem* of feral cats is; for what makes a cat *feral*; for what constitutes *setting them free*; for the effects of *neutering and spaying* them. Thus, SEE-I provides a major process for both clarifying and developing a paper and for expanding it in ways that make it richer.

SEE-I provides a vehicle in which students creativity can come to the forefront. They are choosing—often creatively choosing—forceful ways to *elaborate* and striking *examples* of points they are making. They are creating vivid *illustrations*—metaphors, analogies—to convey what they are trying to communicate to the reader. In Chapter 3, SEE-I is expanded to include other related ways of developing the paper, and a third much more extensive process for enhancing the writing is presented in Chapter 5 with Socratic questioning (see the seventh main feature below, p. xxiii).

From an instructor’s point of view, one of the further virtues of SEE-I is that it gives students a process to begin writing productively right from the beginning of the course. (In my own courses, I often have students engage in SEE-I on the very first day of class. I ask them, for instance, to state, elaborate, exemplify, and illustrate a defining moment in their personal lives, an important concept in the course as they understand it now (such as “*fairness*” or “*writing a paper*”), a key part of the syllabus, or what they take to be the purpose of the course.)

As a separate point, it is worth noting that a substantial part of writing a well-reasoned paper can be accomplished by mastering just two critical thinking techniques: *analysis* around the circle of elements and *SEE-I*. The analysis part allows students to think their way through a topic or issue and then construct a focused plan for their paper. SEE-I then allows them to write out and develop the main points and sub-points of all parts of the plan. It is not the whole of writing a paper, but those two techniques form a strong core on which other critical writing processes can then be built.

Additionally, the two techniques have rich consequences for addressing some perennially problematic aspects of student writing. Giving an analysis with the elements of reasoning directly yields a good part of both the introductory and concluding sections of the paper. And it and SEE-I together straightforwardly suggest not only a natural division of the paper into paragraphs but also specific topic sentences or ideas for those paragraphs.

Moreover, the book strongly recommends that students do the analysis *in writing*—not just in their heads. (In my own classes, it's a requirement.) Though my students tend to feel a pronounced resistance to doing any preparatory work such as this, the resulting success they experience is clear and immediate enough to make many of them more willing to invest the time it takes.\* In line with this process, there is a section of the book called "Writing Before You Write." It recommends that students take written notes, as much as possible, in the form of at least partial SEE-I's. There is a strong motivational factor in this: if students can be induced to do this writing as they plan, while they are only preparing, they will often find that they have already written a substantial draft of their actual paper before they start to compose paragraph one.

Sixth, **models of reasoning through issues.** Students in my own courses have difficulty knowing what actually *to do* when asked to reason something through, and a mere verbal description of what to do helps only to a limited degree. To give a more first-hand experience of reasoning things through, this book contains a number of extended examples (sometimes with a commentary) of how a student might work through crucial aspects of writing. Though the students themselves are fictitious, the examples depict genuine issues of critical writing, and genuine ways of thinking through those issues. The extended examples are set off from the main text in contrasting shades. The examples in Chapter 1 show students thinking about a topic and constructing a plan for their papers, but without a framework for critical thinking. The plans these students come up

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\*Students' resistance is often, of course, much more generalized than this. A question they face in relation to writing a paper is "Why do this? Why do the work of thinking critically about a topic, planning out the paper, and the rest?"

The opening section of this book, "To the Student," is intended to help address that resistance. (In my own classes, I assign it right at the start.) It contains three self-assessment pieces to help them confront three central skills they need if they are to write something even moderately well, and thus why they might need a framework for critical writing. There is a section of feedback on each to allow them to do some serious self-assessment of their responses.

with are, at least in this preliminary way, strong ones, but—because they are not generated by using the concepts and processes of critical thinking—they don't give the focus, guidance, and reliability that the framework for critical writing provides. Though they show people who, in a sense, *happen to* come up with a strong plan, they don't show *how* to do it. They also don't give any guidance in how to carry out the rest of writing a paper.

In the remaining chapters, by contrast, the extended examples display how people can, reliably, come up with a full logically organized plan and then carry out all the rest of the tasks of writing a paper based in the concepts and processes of critical thinking. They show how someone might actually go about identifying assumptions, implications, and the other elements of reasoning, and how someone can generate a focused thesis statement starting from a vague, general topic. They show people checking for accuracy, giving illustrations, doing authentic research, enriching a paper with Socratic questioning, and doing many other tasks. The examples are intended to show not just the finished *product* of the critical writing but the thinking *process* a student might engage in on the way to that finished product. They show people sometimes having to face the confusions and conflicting ideas inherent in critical writing. A goal for actual students using the book in a course is for them not just to read through the examples passively but also to imagine themselves working through the process along with the student in the example.

The responses in the extended examples are not chosen because they are perfect or the best way. They are chosen as genuine and reasoned ways to address challenges anyone faces in writing something significant. Some show students coming up with exciting new insights, but it is important to note that some show students creating a solid but not an extraordinary paper. Moreover, with many of them, instructors and students may find themselves disagreeing strongly with the thesis and/or supporting points in those papers. They may find relatively serious inaccuracies or a failure to go deeper into the issue.

Thus, this book does not endorse the positions or arguments put forward in the examples. (Indeed, some of the positions are ones I myself profoundly disagree with.) The examples in the book are to be seen rather as sincere, good-faith efforts to reason through a topic, to come up with a defensible thesis, one with at least initially reasonable points to support it.

**Seventh, Socratic questioning and enriching a paper using the standards for critical thinking.** The framework gives concrete tools specifically for enriching and expanding a paper. “Socratic questioning,”

as the term is used here, is metacognitive questioning that is based primarily in the *standards* for critical thinking. The standards include *clarity*, *accuracy*, *relevance*, *precision* (the book emphasizes ten of them). When fashioned into specific Socratic questions, they allow students, almost at will, to make “interventions” that enhance the paper, enrich it, give it more substance, and expand it in ways that fill it out and make it more complete.

The Socratic questions (based in the standards) prompt students to ask (and then answer) questions such as:

- How is this relevant to the main point of the paper?
- In what way is this important?
- What are the details of this?
- What are some complications that might arise?

To give just a schematic example: Think of yourself as a student who is having the familiar student problem of “filling the pages.” Your paper seems finished. In it you’ve said XYZ, and one of your main points is X. Using SEE-I, you’ve already elaborated on X and given examples and perhaps an illustration.

But the instructor has assigned an eight-page paper and you have only six.

What can you do? How can you expand the paper in a way that is directly relevant and enriches the paper? (Or, to put it in terms my students often use, how can you get two more pages?)

Socratic questioning gives you a clear way to proceed, to take the next steps. You can ask yourself, “How is X relevant to the thesis of my paper?” You then spell out how X is relevant, and you do that not just in your head but at the keyboard, in your actual writing. If you choose to, you can further ask, “How is X an important point?” “What are some of the details about X?” “What are some of the complications that arise in considering X?” In each case you write out your best answer and judiciously add those paragraphs to your paper.

Notice the way the Socratic questions function. For any given paper, most of them work by fastening on aspects already there in the back of your mind, waiting to be accessed. By answering one or more of the questions, you make explicit what was before only implicit in your thinking. You *already* thought that X was relevant to your thesis; you *already* made the judgment that X was important. That’s why you chose to include X in the first place. The Socratic questions prompt you to spell out the relevance and the importance in the paper itself. With the other two questions, you may or may not already be aware of *details* in X, or of *complications* surrounding it, but with the question posed directly in front of you, you can pause to focus on

them now, and thus generate a wealth of new ideas and paragraphs. You end up “filling the pages” in ways that enhance the paper and give it more substance. Indeed, one of the most striking benefits of Socratic questioning interventions is the sheer abundance of paths they open up for any form of writing.\*

Eighth, **traits of mind**. The book provides concrete guidelines for internalizing and exercising the critical thinking character traits that are so necessary for writing an authentic, creative, compelling paper. These traits of mind—*intellectual courage*, *intellectual humility*, *intellectual empathy*, *fairmindedness*, *intellectual integrity*, and several others—pervade, in different ways, the entire enterprise of critical writing. It takes *intellectual courage* to try, genuinely, to think one’s way through an issue, especially when time pressure, self-doubt and frustration get involved. It takes *intellectual empathy* to capture the other side of an issue or topic, to put oneself into a perhaps alien point of view, to think one’s way through it as that person would, and then to describe it fairmindedly in the paper. It takes *intellectual humility* to engage in genuine research, *intellectual perseverance* to both write and enrich the paper, and *intellectual integrity* to give credit to one’s sources not just because an instructor requires it but because it is a part of being fair.

Ninth, **fundamental and powerful concepts: content, communication, audience, criticality**. One of the most far-reaching features of the book is a compact set of concepts and processes, ones that a writer at any level can use to think through writing-issues that lie outside the limited purview of any book or course on writing. The *fundamental and powerful concepts* of writing are emphasized all through the book: *content*, *communication*, and *audience*; adding *criticality* highlights the distinction between merely writing and writing critically.

Students standardly encounter the concepts of *content*, *communication*, and *audience* as part of a writing course, but too often students see those concepts just as details, or as no different in kind from any number of other important writing concepts, such as sentence fluency, finding your voice, writing vividly, and many others.

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\*I find in my teaching that there is a danger of overload. The sheer abundance of questions can sometimes feel like a burden to students. Even though they can just pick one or two, having so many possible questions to choose from can feel overwhelming.

In my classes, I have students practice using only one or two of the Socratic questions, taken from just a few of the standards. Then, gradually, as students start to see the Socratic questions as helpful rather than burdensome, they can select questions from a greater number of standards.

But *content*, *communication*, *audience* and *criticality* are significantly different from other important concepts in writing. It's not exactly that they are somehow more important. It's that they are *structural*. These four can be used as conceptual tools that allow writers to think through questions or problems that come up with regard to writing about anything or in any context. That is what makes them the fundamental and powerful concepts for writing. In Chapter 6 they are applied to using transitions, to some issues of grammatical correctness, and to other rhetorical aspects, as well as to giving citations and references.

A main goal of this book, then, is for students to start acquiring the habit of thinking issues through using those fundamental and powerful concepts, and then to carry those four with them as conceptual tools beyond the course, whenever they are needed. When students are out of school, and they are writing an important memo in an office where they work, or writing a letter of recommendation for someone, or writing a lesson plan, or anything else, they will be able to carry it out far better if they think it through in terms of how they can best *communicate* their *content* to their *audience*, and do so in a way that brings *criticality* to bear.

Tenth, **practice and assessment exercises, with feedback**. At the end of each chapter there is a set of exercises that prompt students to work through and apply the concepts and processes of critical writing and apply them to their own writing. Many of these (marked with a \*) have feedback and commentary by the author, allowing students to engage in the self-assessment that is such a necessary part of becoming an autonomous critical writer.

Finally, there is one more main feature of this book: **The Spirit of Critical Thinking**. Running through everything else in the book, there is an attempt to foster the spirit as well as the skills and dispositions of robust critical thinking and critical writing. That spirit involves:

—a willingness on the part of students<sup>†</sup> to think their way through a topic, understand it as well as they can, engage in open-minded research about it, and then write about it as clearly, accurately, and fairly as they can. The main goal is not just to report on what

<sup>†</sup>In accord with communicating to an audience, *Critical Writing* is written in a relatively informal style, though there is a note to students advising that an informal style is not appropriate for many academic papers.

<sup>†</sup>Though these are written with respect to students, the same “willingnesses” apply really to everyone.

some source has said, not just to prove a point, still less to jump to a conclusion and then defend it at all costs. The goal is to write a paper that is compelling, trustworthy, and well reasoned and to feel the rich pleasure that can come from that endeavor.

- a willingness on the part of students to re-think their writing. In the book, re-thinking the issue or topic is a built-in part of the process all the way through: critically analyzing the topic, recognizing and including other relevant points of view on an issue, using the standards explicitly, putting an emphasis on fairmindedness, intellectual humility, and other traits of mind. (This book gives several examples of students re-thinking, or questioning, or changing their mind in relation to a topic they are writing about.)
- a realization that improvement in critical writing and critical thinking does not require *mastery* of critical thinking concepts or processes. It requires their repeated use so that, ideally, they become internalized. This can occur at almost any level of expertise.
- a willingness to take their writing seriously, to engage with it and make it their own, to see it as an expression of who they are and of what their best thinking is.\*

A consequent goal in the book is to build in students an increased confidence in their ability to reason and write better. One thing the processes of critical writing reveals is that we often possess an implicit ability to think things through that is greater than we sometimes suppose. The elements of reasoning, intellectual standards, and critical thinking traits of mind bring out this untapped ability. There is a profound and telling difference between just thinking about a topic and asking oneself the focused critical thinking questions: What are its implications? What are my assumptions about it? In what way is this point relevant to the topic? Is this the most important aspect of the topic? How can I bring more of my intellectual courage to bear as I explore it?

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\*There is a section near the end of the book on “Taking It Seriously” (p. 202). In my own classes, I have my students read the first pages of that section right at the beginning of the course.