ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS:
PRE-WRITING FOR THESIS DISCOVERY AS A CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

By Gayle Gaskill

The first thing many of us look for when we mark our college or
high school student's expository papers is a firm, concise thesis
statement, the analytical opinion about a specific topic which
predicts, unifies, and controls the essay from its clear initial
appearance in the first papagraph to its unmistakable final reit-
eration in the last. "The central idea, or thesis, is your
essay's like and spirit," Sheridan Baker promises, advising fresh-
man to "take a stand, make a judgement of value . . . Don't be
timid."[1] Even Ken Macrorie, whose innovative classes shake off the
restraints of a formal outline, insists that "any piece of writing
needs a point . . . that could be pursued with genuine curios-
ity."[2] Stating that judgmental point clearly and without
timidity is a student's main business in pre-writing--but it's
usually the most difficult part of the writing process. It is
also the most essential part. If we skip pre-writing, our writers
flounder in a sea of data or cling desperately to inflated
cliches, but if we hurry it by distributing readymade theses, we
simply push their "difficulties or pre-writing into the writing
stage," as James McCrimmon observes in his well known discussion
of the process.[3] Though we dare not neglect pre-writing, we can
efficiently shape it by inventing specific, productive questions
in class discussions. I find that beginning writers can best dis-
cover their own thesis statements during directed, in-class
pre-writing sessions focused on a thesis question.

The Thesis Question

The thesis question is an analytical, heuristic approach to a
thesis assertion; it suits essays of personal experience, litera-
ture, and library research, as well as business and technical
reports. In a literature class, discussions of texts frequently
become extended pre-writing exercises with a projected essay as a
goal. Though it eventually becomes a paradigm for the student's
private pre-writing, the thesis question functions primarily as

projected papers stimulates the next two, private, largely uncon-
scious pre-writing processes which Young, Becker, and Pike
identify as "incubation and illumination." "If it has been
adequately instructed," they tell us, "a person's subconscious
mind continues to work (to incubate) even after that person has
shifted his attention to other matters." Even if the student who
volunteered her barn-burning topic changes her mind, the "Why?"-
directed discussion remains a model in the minds of her classmates
who are still trying out possible topics. "Illumination" is the
"imaginative leap to a possible solution, a hypothesis."[7] With a
thesis question in mind, a student will recognize the illuminating
answer as a potential thesis when it comes.

The fully discussed thesis question empowers the student to be a
writer during the incubation time while he or she is working,
reading chemistry, or watching television. Good pre-writing needs
the natural negative force of "resistance," says Donald Murray, an
eloquent, recent pre-writing advocate. "There must be time for
the seed of the idea to be nurtured in the mind." Murray calls
this resistance a "rehearsal," when the writer increases his or
her information and awareness, makes notes, and talks about the
projected essay, "working out the piece of writing in oral
language with someone else who can enter into the process of dis-
covery with the writer."[8] The "Why?"-shaped, in-class pre-
writing provides the cues, the audience, and the stage manager for
that verbal rehearsal.

Rehearsing the Thesis

A thesis question assists the last stage of pre-writing, "veri-
fication," in Pike, Becker, and Young's terminology. A second
"Why?"-shaped pre-writing discussion will test the hypothesis[9] by
refining the general thesis question into a specific one for each
writer. The analytical narrative question, "Why did the experi-
ence make you think what you thought?" now becomes, "Why was I, at
ten, first afraid to call the fire department and then angry with
the crowd that followed the engines?" or "Why did I resent my job
making one hundred pounds of potato salad a day for $5.23 an
hour?" As it grows particular, the thesis question predicts not

only the projected essay's topic but its point of view, its pur-
pose for an audience, and the shape of the thesis statement to
come.

For this simple narrative assignment, some students will feel
prepared to frame a thesis in class. Agreeing, however, with
Macrorie and with Eudora Welty that a good writer's first rule is
"tell the truth,"[10] I am suspicious of a glib thesis chosen with-
out incubation time--as is Murray, who warns us that "publishing
writers . . . are astonished at students who can write on command,
ejaculating correct little essays without thought."[11] Most
students will need to go on retrieving and classifying their data
before they know exactly what they want to say. On the other
hand, even the most thoughtful beginning writers need a pre-
writing frame to center their attention on the essay that lies
ahead. By repeatedly asking and rephrasing the thesis question,
I can lead my essayists to test tentative thesis statements
against their evidence and determine which kinds of evidential de-
tails belong in the finished essay.

Thesis Practice and Language Skills

Sentence-combining exercises or traditional grammatical usage
drills offer practical opportunities to phrase tentative thesis
statements, whether the instructor or the student initiates the
process. I may write a deliberately flawed answer to the thesis
question and ask my students to edit it: *"I was afraid to call
the fire department, the crowd that followed the engines made me
angry." For most students, it is fairly easy to identify the comma
splice but more difficult to supply transitions and parallel
structure or to suggest the analytical dimension, the "Why?"-
shape, which will combine the sentence parts into the thesis which
lies under the details of the discussion that led to the sentence.
After several revisions, the thesis might become, "Lacking a
grown-up's authority, I felt helpless to confront either the fire
in the barn or the thrill-seeking crowd that came to watch it."
Now a ten-year-old's helplessness combines the two parts of the
narrative and shapes a recollection into an analytical essay.

"But is that thesis true?" I ask the former ten-year-old. "Did you really feel helpless?" Because the grammatical exercise has a sound thesis as its goal, our objective is accurate, analytical writing, not arbitrary elegance.

Constructive Interference

In a variation of the thesis-editing exercise, I ask each student to write his own tentative answer to the general thesis question, combining the assignment, where appropriate, with the day's lesson in usage, punctuation, or style. Lessons in comma placement, relative clauses, parallel structures, and transitional devices are particularly useful because they help students master the complex sentence patterns which most often shape analytical thesis statements. The exercise never commits a writer to a final thesis, but it gives him or her the useful chance for directed verbal experimentation and lets me interfere constructively in the last, crucial stage of the pre-writing process. I can praise accurate, coherent assertions or detect and correct such common thesis problems as the inconclusive negative (*"I was not happy when the barn burned."), the incoherent double thesis (*"I was afraid to call the fire department, and crowds make me angry."), the imprecise remark (*"Reporting a fire can be interesting."), or the indefinite topic announcement (*"I will write about the day the barn burned."). Answering the thesis question in class, a student gains confidence to shape a unified, coherent, pointed expository essay. The large number of my students these days who want to feel safe and creative at the sam time find in-class pre-writing an assuring opportunity to try out original ideas without fear that they have misunderstood the assignment.

Thesis Questions and Pre-Writing

The thesis question procedure is a simple, flexible addition to the process of pre-writing, which Gordon Rohman first described in 1964. To fight students' reliance on popular cliches and to stimulate thesis discovery, Rohman's pioneering study offers an arbitrary analogy as a paradigm for discovering an original thesis.

Students discuss one activity from Column A (boating, eating, reading, etc.) in terms of an activity from Column B (playing softball, resting, juggling, etc.), using the analogy as a structuring principle and source of vocabulary.[12] Though it leaves writers with broad hypotheses, the Rohman analogy generates original, creative expository papers.

Young, Becker, and Pike offer a more detailed heuristic pre-writing procedure for retrieving data from alternative perspectives, when they describe any potential subject first as a "particle," a fixed object, then as a "wave," a part of a group or process, and finally as a "field," a unified system of component parts. Joined with rhetorical devices, their scheme of invention creates an elaborate system for stimulating memory and imagination, though it is not, they caution us, a system of essay organization.[13] McCrimmon offers a less complicated version of this three-part scheme, then adds and emphasizes the question _why?_ with the journalist's _who, what, where, when, why, how?_ His discussion of observation, interpretation, and inference is a handy, condensed guide to pre-writing.[14] Recent journal articles have viewed the old, familiar rhetorical modes of problem-solution or illustration as a "tagmemic heuristic" of pre-writing[15] or asked for a "metatheory" to provide one "transcendent" paradigm of specific thesis questions for virtually every type of essay a student could write.[16]

My own pre-writing paradigm is a simple, practical one, adaptable to most subjects and rhetorical modes. As I update my study of the methods that published experts have invented, I adapt them to the needs, questions, and expectations of my Minnesota students. Pre-writing is an essential process of the writing class, yet in the initial assignment, in the follow-up topic discussion, and even in exercises that strengthen style and grammatical usage, we can direct and simplify pre-writing with repeated "Why?"-shaped thesis questions.

NOTES

[1]Sheridan Baker, The Complete Stylist and Handbook (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), pp. 7, 9.

[2] Ken Macrorie, Writing To Be Read, rev. 2nd ed. (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1976), pp. 113-114.

[3] James M. McCrimmon, Writing With A Purpose, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 47.

[4] D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke, Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State Univ., U.S. Office of Education Cooperative Research Project No. 2174, 1964), pp. 9, 16-17. A more readily accessible summary of this research is available from D. Gordon Rohman, "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," CCC 16 (1965) 106-12.

[5] Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 73.

[6] Macrorie, p. 77.

[7] Young, Becker, and Pike, pp. 73-74.

[8] Donald M. Murray, "Write Before Writing," CCC 29 (1978) 357-77.

[9] Young, Becker, and Pike, pp. 7576.

[10] Macrorie, p. 5.

[11] Murray, p. 375.

[12] Rohman and Wlecke, pp. 49-65.

[13] Young, Becker, and Pike, pp. 119-36.

[14] McCrimmon, pp. 31-39.

[15] Victor J. Vitanza, "A Tagmemic Heuristic for the Whole Composition," CCC 30 (1979) 270-74.

[16] Janice M. Lauer, "Toward a Metatheory of Heuristic Procedures," CCC 30 (1979) 268-69.