3

Writing Processes

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

To write is to take part in many processes, personal and social, in interaction with others, inside your head, and between you and a sheet of paper. This chapter provides an overview of these processes, which will be examined in greater detail in later chapters. Understanding that writing is part of many processes helps relieve the uncertainties and anxieties of writing and helps you focus on the next relevant part of the process. Understanding the variety of processes that vary from situation to situation helps you choose how to go about writing any particular paper and helps you write more creatively, effectively, efficiently, and appropriately.

In the latter half of the chapter, an extended case study shows the processes of writing in action for one student writing a paper for a course.

KEY POINTS

1. Every piece of writing comes into being through many processes.
2. Writers progress step by step, trusting in the processes, even when they are not sure where all the steps will lead.
3. The processes of each kind of paper differ from those of every other kind, and the processes of each individual paper differ from others of its kind.
4. Several processes, however, often appear in a recognizable form. These recurring processes range from the general ways situations unfold to the detailed procedures of improving your drafts through revision and editing.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

- Have you ever been stuck in trying to write something? At what point did you get stuck?

- What different things do you do when you write a paper for history than when you write a paper for English? When you write an essay in an exam compared to when you write a research paper? When you write a letter to a friend compared to when you write a shopping list?
- Does writing help you to learn? What has writing any particular paper taught you? When has writing helped you understand the material better, shown you how parts of the subject fit together, increased your skill, or led you to new thoughts?

An Author's Confession

Often enough when I sit down in my familiar desk chair and turn on the computer, I have no idea what I am going to write or how I am going to write it. Not every day, not on every page, but often enough, I find myself at a loss as to what to do next. I may have a general idea for a book chapter on a certain topic, using certain materials and referring to certain ideas. Or I may need to write a handout for a class or a recommendation for a student who wants to go to law school. Beyond these general goals, however, I really have no idea what will go on the page or how I should organize my thoughts to produce those words.

This is usually the moment I go make a cup of coffee, or read my e-mail, or find out what new games my son has loaded on the computer.

I have the dreaded blank-page syndrome. I can't begin to imagine how I should begin working, how I am going to fill up the page to have something creditable to meet my deadline. Not knowing what words to start putting on the paper, I am overcome with panic and an overwhelming desire to do something else.

After almost half a century of writing and almost thirty years of teaching writing, I ought to know better — but then again I keep getting myself into new spots, so even if I figured out what to put on the page yesterday, I still don't know what I ought to put on the page today. That's what creative work means — and all writing is creative work, even if it is just creating a summary of an article you have just read. You create something new, and if it is new, how could you know before you began what it would be? Inevitably, almost all writers at one time or another face the questions of, What am I doing? Can I do this? How do I even begin thinking about this?

Trusting the Process

I have learned one thing that helps control the panic and guides me toward useful activity. Writing is always a series of processes. I have come to trust

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the processes of writing. If I take first steps that seem to make sense, I will start to go down a path that will lead to a finished piece of writing. As I go down the path, I will engage in different activities that will help me figure out what I am doing, how I should go about it, and eventually what words I will use.

I can't expect a finished product to emerge the moment I turn my mind to a writing task or stretch my fingers over the keyboard. Any one of a number of rather different activities can get me going. I think about the goals I wish to accomplish. I jot down phrases or ideas I think might be relevant to the subject. I look over the writing that I have done to that point on the project, maybe even outline it, to see where the work was going. I look for some data or sources that will help develop my ideas. I freewrite about the germ of a thought in the back of my mind. I read something related to get some ideas. I ask myself where I am in the process of writing. Any of these or many other actions can help me take the next step, bring my task into clearer shape, and make my task that much easier the next time I sit down to write.

The Variety of Processes

Writing is a process of responding to the statements of others, a way of acting and participating within the drama of the term. Because each kind of paper is part of a different drama, a different kind of interaction, the writing process varies from situation to situation. Thus the process of writing a summary of a chapter for study purposes (see page 107) differs somewhat from

the process of writing a summary to demonstrate to a teacher that you have read and understood a difficult philosophic passage (see pages 127–130). Both of these differ substantially from the process of answering an essay exam question based on the same material (see pages 127–130). If these apparently closely related activities (covered in Chapters 5 and 6) differ, how much more would they differ from preparing an analytical essay (see Chapter 9), a laboratory report (see Chapter 12), or a persuasive argument (see Chapter 15)?

The different assignments writers in college are likely to encounter are described in various parts of this book. Their locations are listed on the chart on this page. In these sections the text identifies at least one good path that leads in the appropriate direction. You may well think of others that will also work for you.

PROCESSES FOR DIFFERENT KINDS OF ASSIGNMENTS

Guidelines for Journals — pages 81–83, Chapter 4

Rewriting Notes in Various Formats — pages 103–106, Chapter 5

Writing Summaries for Yourself — page 107, Chapter 5

Writing Summaries for Others — pages 129–130, Chapter 6

Responding to Essay Exam Questions: A Review — pages 139–140, Chapter 6

Writing Papers About Real-Life Situations — pages 156–158, Chapter 7

Developing a Personal Illustration — pages 174–175, Chapter 8

Comparing Everyday and Disciplinary Thinking — pages 181–183, Chapter 8

Writing an Analytical Essay — pages 210–211, Chapter 9

The Investigative Report — pages 233–234, Chapter 11

Reporting Fieldwork — pages 258–260, Chapter 12

The Four Stories of the Experimental Report — pages 271–272, Chapter 12

Assignment 1: A Complex Event — page 295, Chapter 13

Assignment 2: An Open Question — pages 300–302, Chapter 13

Solving Case Problems — page 329, Chapter 14

Writing the Essay of Argument — pages 356–358, Chapter 15

Some Common Processes of Writing

The following sections describe some large organizing processes that appear in some form in most writing assignments. Again, this list should not be con-

sidered a single path to be always followed. Aspects of these are discussed in the following chapters in the context of specific kinds of writing.

1. The process of unfolding situations
2. The process of putting your goals and the task in focus
3. The process of developing ideas
4. The process of finding and gathering resources
5. The process of thinking through your materials
6. The process of planning and organizing your statement
7. The process of producing text
8. The process of making your sources explicit
9. The process of examining and improving text
10. The process of receiving responses and moving on to the next statement

Unfolding Situations

Each situation in which you write is preceded by various events and interactions — things you have read, things others have said to you, and things you have said and written. Thus, as we have discussed, your writing somehow fits into a sequence of unfolding events and carries that interaction on to the next stage, even if you are not always aware of it. Sometimes this process is obvious, as when you write a letter of application for a job after reading a want ad, the company responds requesting more information, and you write back. Sometimes the unfolding situation is less obvious, as when a reflection on your life seems to pop out of nowhere when you are writing a journal. Nonetheless, if you think for a few minutes you may remember what led you to wonder about your life in this way.

By recognizing the unfolding writing situation, you can place your statement in a larger set of interactions. The writing assignment or rhetorical situation (see pages 40–41) usually grows out of easily identifiable sequences of interactions. In school writing this process of interaction evolves in discussions, lectures, and reading, as discussed in Chapter 2. This process involves many people, not only the instructor and other students, but also the authors of the books and articles you read and other people whose statements find their way into the class.

Putting Your Goals and the Task in Focus

Once you realize you are in a rhetorical situation — specifically, that you need to write something — you start to reflect and plan. In college writing this process is often set in motion by a teacher-given assignment. The assignment to some extent poses a problem, sets goals for you, and directs you toward specific tasks. But since in writing there is rarely any single correct answer, you decide on your own specific plans for completing the assignment; that is, you represent the task to yourself so you can direct your activity. (See the discussion of task representation on pages 40–41.)

Identifying your rhetorical problem, goals, and tasks helps you define your purposes in writing and focuses your energies in useful channels.

Although this process may be carried out largely on your own, discussing your understanding of your task with the instructor and other students can help you clarify your directions. If you are writing as part of a collaborative team, you need to discuss plans deeply to develop a common understanding of your goals and how the work will be divided and coordinated. Too often students on a team think they share an understanding of a project only to go off in separate directions that never wind up fitting together.

Developing Ideas

Once you know what you want to accomplish in general terms, you still need to develop the specifics of your statement. Rarely do words immediately start to flow in perfect prose to make a perfect statement. You usually first need to think through what kinds of ideas and materials will achieve your goal. If you want to persuade your parents that your desire to switch from computer science to art is not totally insane, a waste of money, and a threat to your future livelihood, you need to think about what arguments will help them to understand your reasons (see Chapter 15 on how to develop arguments). After thinking about their values, their views of life, and their hopes for you, you realize that you need to develop the idea that art and graphic design are a major sector of the new economy of the information age, that computers and electronic communication are providing major new opportunities for graphic designers, and that someone with your background in computers will have a great advantage in the job market. Moreover, you realize that to support these ideas it would be useful to get some examples of the kinds of new opportunities opening up and some economic projections of how much work is likely to be available in this area in ten years.

Similarly, imagine you have been assigned by your history professor to examine an incident that reveals something about changing attitudes toward immigration. To satisfy this assignment, not only do you have to pick a relevant incident, but you need to find out much more about the incident and develop some ideas about what the incident reveals.

The process of determining the ideas and materials you will discuss is known in classical rhetoric as *invention* (see pages 75–76 for a fuller discussion). Brainstorming and other individual and group techniques can help you find what you will write about. If you are working with others, it is especially important to share ideas with all members of the group to get the benefit of everyone's thinking and to come to a common agreement on what you will write.

Finding and Gathering Resources

The process of locating and drawing on resources can be a distinct and major part of any piece of writing. Even a letter of complaint about a defective CD player will be stronger if you can find the guarantee and sales receipt that prove the machine is still under warranty; the complaint may be even

stronger if someone who knows about electronics can help you describe the difficulty you are having.

In some writing situations you already know what you need to draw on. Even in these cases, however, you may still need to prod your memory to flesh out the details of incidents or to expand on ideas you already hold (see Chapters 4 and 8). In many cases, finding resources outside your own experiences can add strength, specificity, depth, and persuasiveness to your writing. The most obvious external resources are in the library (as discussed in Chapter 11), but interviews, field observations, and laboratory experiments can provide important substance for your writing (as discussed in Chapter 12). Sometimes just reading a book or an article on a subject will help spark your own ideas. All resources you use contribute substance and strength to your writing. They draw you more deeply into the issues, and then they back you up.

Thinking Through Your Materials

Once you have gathered your ideas and materials, you need to think through how they add up, how they may be taken apart or combined in new ways, or what meaning you can find in them. (This process, called analysis, is examined in Chapters 9, 13, and 14.)

Planning and Organizing Your Statement

At times you may know quite early some aspects of what your final piece of writing will look like. If you are assigned to write a five-hundred-word analysis of a short story, for example, you know right away that the final paper will be about two double-spaced typed pages, that there will be quotations from the story, and that some sentences will explain the meaning of the story. As you read and reread the story, you may start to notice specific passages that you think are important. You may also develop specific ideas and certain phrases that you will use in your final essay. You may even identify a sequence of related thoughts that turn into the structure or backbone of your argument. However, at one point you must draw all your planning together with the thought that you will soon be writing a draft. At this moment, outlines, sketches, flow charts, or other planning notes help you see how you will fit the parts of your paper together. You may revise the plans once you start writing, but a plan at this point helps you know where you are going in your writing. (*Planning* is further discussed on pages 206–207.)

Producing Text

It is much easier to face a blank page once you have focused goals, formulated ideas, gathered resources, thought through materials, and written out a concrete plan. When you know where you are going and some of the important places you need to pass through, you don't have to pull sentences out of

the blue. Instead, you need only to write the sentences that take you down your path. Your first draft marks out the things you need to say. Once you have established that basic path of words, you can flesh out, explain, qualify, sharpen, adjust, or otherwise improve that basic path, but you will have the security of knowing how to get from start to finish of your statement. You will have a text to work with.

Making Your Sources Explicit

In the course of developing your paper you may have drawn on many resources. When you finally start writing your essay, these resources work their way into the text, directly or indirectly. The resources you bring most directly into the text need to be identified so that the reader knows what you are using. In personal or autobiographical writing this may mean describing memories or experiences that you are writing about or that explain why you believe in particular ideas. (Chapters 4 and 8 suggest ways of discussing personal experiences.) When you rely on other people's writing, you need to refer to the ideas and words of those other texts (see pages 240–242) and then explicitly identify what book, magazine, or electronic source you got the words and information from. (Principles of citation are discussed on pages 242–247.) Chapter 11 on library research presents standard formats for citing books, magazines, and other research material.

Examining and Improving Text

With the text of a first draft completed, you can look it over and see how it may be improved. You can ask many different kinds of questions about it, from fundamental issues of argument to surface issues of appearance. You can ask if you have left out any necessary or useful part of your argument or evidence, whether you have explained your ideas and resources fully enough, or whether you have taken into consideration opposing views. You can ask whether you have approached the topic from the right angle or placed the parts in the most effective order, or pushed your conclusions far enough or too far. You can ask whether readers can follow your reasoning, will have the necessary knowledge to understand you precisely, or will find your examples and evidence persuasive. Nearer to the surface, you can ask questions about whether readers will find your sentences clear and easy to follow, whether your style is appropriate for the situation, or even whether you have spelled all the words correctly.

Every question you ask about the text gives you a perspective for revision and editing. Deeper questions and improvements are usually called *revision* — seeing the writing again through fresh eyes. Improving the surface features, such as sentence readability, grammatical correctness, and spelling, is usually called *editing*. Giving your text a final examination for typographic errors and other mistakes is usually called *proofreading*. All three are a part of the process of looking at your drafts to see how they might be improved.

Some writers tend to examine their drafts only for surface correctness. Proofreading, because it requires only checking out the text for such things as correct typing, spelling, and grammar, is perhaps the easiest and least painful aspect of improving a text. The questions to ask at this level are fairly clear-cut. Proofreading is necessary, but it doesn't lead to deeper improvements.

In editing, you question what you want each sentence to say and the most effective way of saying it, so it requires more complicated thinking. You consider how clearly your sentence formulates your ideas and what your different options are for putting your ideas together. You also think about how you want your ideas to connect with each other. So editing is a bit tougher and a little more painful than proofreading. But it does make for better, clearer, more readable writing.

The most difficult and sometimes most painful process is basic revision. It is difficult because it involves thinking about what the entire piece of writing is trying to say, and how to bring the parts of the writing together. It is sometimes painful because you may have to change your text in substantial ways. You may have to move parts around, throw away sections and sentences you were previously pleased with, and write new paragraphs. You have to open up issues that you had thought you had solved when you got your first draft down on paper. In your relief at having completed a draft, you may not feel very excited about asking tough questions about what you have already done. On the other hand, only after looking again at your text fully and deeply and revising can you see whether you have accomplished what you set out to do. Showing your drafts to others will often help you see your writing freshly and ask the right kinds of questions to improve it. (See pages 145–146, 184–186, and 158–159 for more on these subjects.)

Receiving Responses and Moving on to the Next Statement

The writing process continues after an assignment is handed in to the teacher or a memo is distributed to coworkers. The people who read the paper or memo will have some response to it, which they may express. These responses may be thoughts of their own counterarguments, follow-up actions, or (as in the case of teacher grading) evaluation and suggestions for improvement. You may have the opportunity and desire to answer to these responses, or you may simply think about what others have said. In either case, these responses show how others see your writing, what you have been able to convey, and what you might want to do differently the next time around.

If a piece of writing is part of an ongoing interaction, such as a continuing course, a work project, or a public dispute in, say, student government, it becomes background for the next interchange. As you discuss the next topic in class, the discussion may build on ideas and topics you examined in earlier papers, and unresolved questions may come up again for discussion. If you are working on a long-term project at work, the findings of your first report may be incorporated in a follow-up report. If you are engaged in a public debate, your opponent may quote your words back to you. Your words stay alive in an ongoing process of interaction.

REVIEWING WRITING PROCESSES

The following list identifies brief reviews of particular aspects of writing processes that appear throughout this book. Because some writing assignments focus more on certain processes, these reviews appear where they are most relevant. The review of planning, for example, although it often occurs early in the process of writing a paper, is placed in a later chapter in relation to analytical writing, which usually requires more thought about planning than other forms of writing. Proofreading, which is usually one of the last things you do with a piece of writing, comes in an early chapter in relation to answering exam questions because last-minute checks of your writing are quite useful in these situations.

Task representation (see Chapter 2)
Planning to write (see Chapter 9)
Invention (see Chapter 4)
Revision and drafting (see Chapter 7)
Referring to your sources (see Chapter 11)
Revealing your sources and avoiding plagiarism (see Chapter 5)
Editing (see Chapter 8)
Proofreading (see Chapter 6)

The Processes of One Classroom Writing Assignment: A Case Study

The best way to see how the particular processes of any piece of writing grow out of a specific situation is to look in detail at how one piece of writing developed. The following case study describes how Sandra Malowski, a first-year student in a large state university, came to write a paper for a course within her school's Communications Department.

Sandra, along with eighty other first- and second-year students in the course Communications 11: Mass Media in American Life, was assigned a three-page paper analyzing newspaper stories. The paper was due in the tenth week of the semester. It was the third of four assigned papers for the course, each one requiring some analysis of actual newspaper, magazine, movie, radio, or television stories. Throughout the term the professor and her teaching assistant explained the kinds of analysis they were looking for and the kinds of ideas the students might be exploring through the analysis. Because of this preparation, Sandra and most of the students had a good idea of what was required and how to go about it by the time the paper was assigned.

The Course Unfolds

The class met for four hours each week. Twice a week the professor lectured on how movies, television, radio, newspapers, and magazines reflected and influenced modern American society, repeatedly suggesting that the media had become central to our actions and attitudes. The lectures were illustrated with movie and video clips, radio recordings, and excerpts from news and magazine stories. The third meeting each week was a class discussion and analysis of a television show or news story. Finally the students met once a week in small groups with a graduate teaching assistant to discuss all the ideas raised in lectures, discussions, and readings. The readings were from a textbook and an anthology of articles about current controversies about the media. Thus the paper Sandra had to write was part of a process of discussion of ideas, information, and materials that went throughout the term.

The course began with a few historical lectures about how the media had moved into prominence in American society, starting with the expansion of newspapers in the late nineteenth century, continuing with the rise of Hollywood and the creation of radio networks, and ending with the growth of the cable TV industry and the start of the Internet. In these lectures, the professor emphasized how the media influenced the changing shape of American society. For example, she discussed how, starting in the 1920s, going to the movies became a major social activity and how movie stars provided models for social behavior and styles. She also discussed recurring criticisms going back to the nineteenth century that music, and later movies and television, were corrupting the morals of the youth. The first assigned paper asked students to explore how those historical controversies were still alive today.

After this historical introduction the course turned to the contemporary media — how they were organized, what roles they served in society, and what kinds of stories, images, and attitudes they communicated. For example, some classes were devoted to the social images of family, race, gender, and sexuality presented on television situation comedies. The second assigned paper asked students to look at how television represented certain groups of people or certain issues.

A few classes then examined how radio and TV talk shows were forms of political expression and influenced the political process. Next the class turned to how the news was presented; this unit culminated in an assigned paper. Thus the papers Sandra had to write were part of a process of discussion based on materials in the course.

The first paper asked students to analyze recent complaints about a particular movie, television show, or piece of music in relation to similar historical controversies. Sandra did fairly well on that paper, getting a B–. However, the teaching assistant, who marked the paper, commented that Sandra spent too much time describing the plot of the movie *Natural Born Killers*. She said that Sandra pointed out controversial aspects but did not focus on those details that made them controversial and did not discuss the exact way in which the current controversy related to the themes of previous controversies. In the second paper, in which Sandra analyzed gender roles in

her favorite television drama, *E.R.* she did better, getting a B+. The grader, however, mentioned that although Sandra had collected many details on how men and women acted in gendered ways and had made some good observations about those behaviors, her analysis would have gone farther if she had organized those details into categories, such as behaviors that show deference to authority and behaviors that show aggressiveness. In the meantime, in the discussion sections, both professor and teaching assistant kept pressing students to make their claims more detailed and orderly and to identify what exactly led them to their observations. Thus each paper was part of a process of instructors defining what they wanted and of students learning to meet those requirements.

The Paper Is Assigned

With this background, the instructor handed out the assignment sheet for the third paper in late October. The assignment sheet read as follows:

Communications 11 — Mass Media in American Life
Writing Assignment #3
Length: about 1000 words or three typed pages
Due: November 17

Over the next three weeks we will be studying how news on television and radio and in the newspaper has influenced American society. The kinds of stories news media tell and the way they tell them frame how we view events, particularly political events. This assignment examines how the news media frame news stories.

You are to read "Making Sense of the News" by W. Russell Neuman, Marion R. Just, and Ann N. Crigler from their book *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). In this chapter the authors describe the five typical ways, or frames, that people in the news media use to write stories and that viewers tend to use to understand news.

Your task is to analyze one story or several closely related stories on a political event as presented on major network television news or in a major newspaper. The analysis is to examine how the way the story is told creates the meaning of the story. For your analysis, try using the categories presented in the Neuman, Just, and Crigler chapter. Show how the patterns they present reveal how the story is being presented, and therefore what meanings are being conveyed about the

political process. Be as detailed as you can in showing how the stories are organized and given meaning within these patterns. If you do not think that the categories work well for your stories, explain why and develop new, more appropriate categories.

The chapter the students were asked to read was about fifteen pages long. It defined frames as "the conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information." The chapter then described research based on interviews with ordinary citizens about how they perceive several current news stories and on analyses of media stories of those events. The research found that both the interviewees and the media stories most often used five frames to interpret the news: "economic themes, divisions of protagonists into 'us' and 'them,' perceptions of control by powerful others, a sense of the human impact of the issues, and the application of moral values." The chapter then discussed and gave examples of each of these five frames. Here are excerpts from the discussions of the five frames:

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Since the chapter was part of the assigned reading for the first week of the unit, Sandra read it quickly for the next class, noting the five kinds of frames and thinking briefly about them. During the class the professor illustrated these frames with some examples from the newspaper and some video clips, which the class discussed. Some students wondered whether there might not be other ways of telling news stories, but Sandra argued that since people were interested in the news to learn about money, conflict, power, human predicaments, and moral values, they were the natural categories to use.

Over the next few meetings, the class read and discussed other aspects of how the news is presented and is part of the political process: the increasing role of television in elections through debates, interviews, campaign stories, and political analysis shows; the increasing use of political ads, particularly attack ads; the increased role of fund-raising and special-interest groups in politics because of the need for money to pay for video ads; and the way candidates, and government officials work to create video images through photo opportunities and soundbites (brief quotations that will sound good on the news). Thus the paper assignment followed through on extended class examination of the topic from several angles.

While Sandra was putting off hard thinking about the paper during this period, she did watch the television news more regularly, noticing how stories were presented. Since this was a period when President Clinton and Congress, under the leadership of Senator Dole and Representative Gingrich, were engaged in a conflict over the budget, she started to pay attention to how this story was being presented. She noticed how well the story seemed to fit the frame of a conflict story, with reporters wondering who would back down first, who would stand stronger, and who would win. She thought this was a little bit odd, since at one level this seemed obviously an economic story about how we ought to balance the federal budget. It also occurred to her that, even though the government's fundamental role was at stake in this conflict, no stories really looked into those issues. This conflict seemed to Sandra a good issue to write about, even though it was quite complicated and there were far too many stories on it to cover them all.

The Writing Moves into Focus

On Monday, November 13, the professor reminded the class that the paper was due that Friday. Having definitely decided to work on the budget con-

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Senate Majority Leader Dole, Vice President Gore, President Clinton, and Speaker of the House Gingrich hold a press conference during the budget crisis of 1995.

flict story, Sandra videotaped that evening's national news on two networks, reviewed the different versions of the story, and selected the one that seemed to lend itself to analysis. She then rewatched the four-minute segment she had selected several times and took notes. Her notes included the introduction to the story by the news anchor, a summary of the story, and some quotations from the reporter and public figures quoted in the story. She also took notes on the visual images that accompanied the story. As she was taking notes, she kept in mind some of the ideas the class discussed about soundbites and presentation of political images. Because the short segment moved so rapidly and she wanted to make sure her notes were accurate, she watched the tape one more time after her notes were complete to doublecheck their accuracy.

These are her notes

Lead from show intro.

One of three top stories

"In Washington the President vetoes, The Republicans Dig in. Much of Washington could shut down."

anchor, "That running game of political chicken between the President and the Congressional Leadership."

first segment 2 minutes by Brian Williams "Brian, any late movement there tonight"

Reporter standing in front of White House.

reports "signs of movement in the game of nuances" indications that WH would give on spending cuts if Republicans would give on Medicare. "beginning of a framework of a deal"

Pres. later spoke to moderate democrats "told them what they wanted to hear." 15 second sound bite of President Clinton. "I am fighting it today, I will fight it tomorrow. I will fight it next week and next month. I will fight it until we get a budget deal that is fair to all Americans."

Reporter: "It is enough to make an anti-government cynic out of anyone. Anyone in this town will tell you this is all just driven by momentum and sheer politics. It almost takes a crash to start it back up again."

follow up question: President scheduled to leave for Japan on Wednesday, moved to Friday.

Second segment, 2 minutes reported by Lisa Myers from Capitol Hill

starts with clip of "The Chaplain opening the Senate with a plea for divine intervention to avoid shutdown."

"But there are no negotiations"— quick shots of capitol dome and white house, while reporter describes conflict.

quote from Senator Domenici about how President seems to want conflict.

"Republicans are not budging either" Repubs want the president to embrace their goal. shot of senate chamber.

Quote from Gingrich, "What the Clinton Administration objects to is that we are committed to balancing the budget in seven years." Similar quote from Dole. shots of committee meetings.

Congress to stay open until midnight to allow visit from the WH, but senior republican comments "a visit from tooth fairy is more likely."

Switch to discussion of impact — multi-colored chart showing close down means 800,000 workers furloughed; passport office, monuments and national parks closed. Another chart of unaffected services: post office, social security payments, essential services such as military and air-traffic control.

Story ends with quote from another senior Republican going back tough stand on conflict: "This will not be a one- or two-day affair."

Jennings: "despite the Budget Crisis it was another good day on Wall Street."

Thinking Seriously

As Sandra kept reviewing the videotape and her notes, she started to analyze and think about how parts of the video segment matched the categories of frames she had read about. First she noticed that the story was structured in a conflict frame. The lead sentences read: "In Washington the President vetoes, The Republicans Dig in. Much of Washington could shut down." The anchor said, "That running game of political chicken between the President and the Congressional Leadership." The story was organized around conflict, with two opposing segments from the White House and Capitol Hill and contrasting video images of the White House and president versus the Capitol and congressional leaders. Sandra noticed that there were even dueling soundbites from the president and the various leaders.

Sandra also saw that each half of the story was supplemented by a brief human impact frame — how the presidential plans would be affected and what would happen to government services.

Sandra then decided to sketch out analytic notes on how the five frames applied to the story, hoping that this process might help her develop her thoughts. These are her analytic notes:

> **Economic Frame – the economic issues aren't here except as moves in a game. Odd, the next lead in to the stock market report suggested that the budget battle was irrelevant to the real economy, as though Wall Street didn't even pay attention. Policy issues behind economics totally invisible.**
>
> **Conflict frame – most obvious. basic structure of story is of conflict of two sides. the way the story is told. conflicting soundbites. conflicting images, posturing of two sides.**
>
> **Powerlessness frame – here the conflict is presented as who would have power. The powerless ones are only the by-standers – the working government and the people of America. who have to watch their needs bypassed in this battle of the leaders.**
>
> **Human Impact frame – No direct stories about people stranded because they need passports – only general reports about impact.**
>
> **Morality frame – interesting. Not directly but only through ironic quotations. Chaplain asking for divine intervention, cynical quotation ending each one, "just driven by politics," and "tooth fairy." Ironic stance of reporters, that this is all silly posturing.**

She then reflected more on what the notes showed:

> **The weirdest thing is that the economic story vanished. The report has no real discussion of different ideas behind the conflict, what exactly would be the difference if either side won, what even were the exact, detailed points of disagreement. The conflict is taken only as a matter of belief, like two opposing religions or conflicting sport teams. You don't ask then why people disagree; it is just their belief or commitment.**

There is a funny cynicism of commentary. Everyone knows the politicians are staging a rigged fight for the media. Story is only become bizarre tip of a very serious iceberg, but we are never shown the iceberg. How did this happen? How did a debate over the government get turned into a personal contest?

As we look over the thoughts Sandra had about the news story, we can see that she went through a substantial process of thinking and analysis before she sat down to write a draft. That thinking process involved writing a few things down, but not in final form. Even though she may use in the final paper some phrases that she first used in these thinking notes, she did not try to come up with a formal paper at this point. She recognized that this writing was just a stage in the process of developing her thoughts.

Planning

Now that Sandra had some ideas about what she wanted to write, she spoke with the teaching assistant after class Wednesday to confirm that she was on the right track. The TA liked her topic and insights and gave her some suggestions about how to organize the paper. Immediately afterwards, Sandra sat down in a quiet corner of the cafeteria and sketched out a plan for the essay. She didn't like writing formal outlines; she preferred to sketch out ideas in a loose paragraph form.

Plan for Analysis of Political Story

Dramatic confrontation on TV.

Seemed extreme example of conflict frame for news. Two opposed parts, 2 minutes each, contrasting White House, Republican Congress.

two reporters at two locations. contrasting shots of WH, Cap buildings, and then President and Republican leaders. Fighting opposed quotes.

Impact and powerlessness frames point to citizens as victims to politicians fighting over power.

But same time as presented as a dire crisis, moral frame is presented through quotations from chaplain, unnamed people, makes the conflict appear silly, unrelated to real events. Economic frame is totally absent, even though the fight is over a budget issue. Policy questions not reported.

Conclusion — cynicism of press and public (maybe bring into intro).

Writing the Paper Up

With her thoughts well worked out and with many notes to work from, Sandra should have had an easy time writing a first draft that night. Actually, she spent a long time hanging out with friends after dinner, and then, back in her room, felt tired and overwhelmed by the task of writing. She took a nap. But finally, trusting in the process, she forced herself to get up and look at her notes. She realized everything she needed was there. It only took her about two hours to turn out a rough draft, because her plan worked well and most of the details were in her notes. Exhausted, she left the last couple of sentences to write the next day. She had no idea whether what she had done was any good, but at least she felt she had something on paper. She printed out what she had and went to bed.

The next morning she took her draft with her and looked at it during an hour break between classes. She was pleased. She noticed and marked up in pen some sentences she could write more clearly, a couple of examples that went on too long, a couple of spelling and grammar errors, some typos. Overall, however, the essay made sense, presented the conclusions she had come to, and spoke to the assignment, which she reread just to make sure. Unlike some of her other writing where she kept juggling the order of ideas, this essay seemed to have a real logical order, focused first on describing the news story through the conflict frame, and then talking about how the other frames fit in and put the conflict in perspective. Ending with the morality frame showed how the conflict frame seemed to be missing the point; she could then discuss how the economic issues that lay behind the story were totally hidden. She was still stuck on an ending, but she figured that one would come to her that night when she sat down again at the computer. She also wondered what to do with the cynicism expressed by the reporters and some people they quoted.

That afternoon she checked through the videotape one more time to make sure she had the quotations right. Then that evening she entered her revisions into the computer and made a few other changes. With everything she had written clearly in mind, her closing paragraph almost wrote itself. As she read the paper over for one final time, the title came to her. She printed the paper out and got to sleep before midnight.

We can see in Sandra's process of writing up the paper how much she relied on all the processes that came before. All of them made the actual act of coming up with and revising a text much easier. The earlier processes — carried out at many different moments, spread over a long period — gave her almost everything she needed, except for the final words, and even some of them came from earlier stages.

The Big Fight — over what? Oh, just the future of the country

Sandra Malowski
Communications 11
November 17, 1995

On the evening news on November 13, 1995, Americans saw a dramatic confrontation between Democratic President Clinton and the leaders of the Republican-controlled Congress. This confrontation would result that night in a shutdown of the government of this country. As Peter Jennings, the anchor, announced at the beginning of the ABC Nightly News, "In Washington the President Vetoes, The Republicans Dig in. Much of Washington could shut down." The story was overwhelmingly set in a conflict frame, one of the five frames Neuman, Just, and Crigler say dominate the presentation of the news in the United States. My analysis reveals that this news story was built around conflict, both by the news media and by the politicians who provided the conflicting soundbites and visual images. The human impact and morality frames are also brought in indirectly; however, the most important frame, the economic, is entirely hidden. The way these four frames fit together built a strange cynicism into the story, a cynicism that seems all too common in the way we view politics these days.

Neuman, Just, and Crigler say that conflict stories emphasize "polarized forces" in competition, related to a view of "the political world as an ongoing series of contests, each with a new set of winners and losers." Peter Jennings couldn't have been more obvious in the way he framed the story, introducing it by calling it "that running game of political chicken between the President and the Congressional leadership." Then the four-minute story was split into two two-minute segments, devoted to the two sides of the conflict.

Brian Williams reported the first segment on the President's side of the conflict. Williams was standing in front of the White House, lights burning into the night. He emphasized the gamelike strategy of the story by presenting the President's suggestion of a compromise as "signs of movement in the game of nuances." Williams then presented a fifteen-second video clip of a determined president delivering a determined soundbite: "I am fighting it today, I will fight it tomorrow. I will fight it next week and next month. I will fight it until we get a budget deal that is fair to all Americans."

Even while presenting the President's fighting words as fighting, the reporter nonetheless called attention to the fact that the fight seemed something of a show,

put on for the press, saying that the President told his audience of moderate Democrats "what they wanted to hear." Williams then commented about the budget negotiations, "Anyone in this town will tell you this is all just driven by momentum and sheer politics. It almost takes a crash to start it back up again."

The second segment, on the Congressional side of the battle, was reported by Lisa Myers from Capitol Hill. This story opened with a bit of ironic commentary, showing a video clip of a chaplain opening the Senate session "with a plea for divine intervention to avoid shutdown." The story rapidly moves from the hopeful prayer to the conflict: "But there are no negotiations. The Republicans are not budging either." The summary is accompanied by quick shots of the capitol dome and the White House, followed by shots of the Senate floor, committee rooms, and Republicans being interviewed. Each video clip is accompanied by a fighting soundbite, such as the one from House Republican leader Newt Gingrich, "What the Clinton Administration objects to is that we are committed to balancing the budget in seven years." Senator Domenici, Senator Dole, and an unnamed senior Republican are also quoted. The story ends again with an ironic commentary on the staged nature of this fight show. Lisa Myers reports that Congress is planning to stay in session until midnight just in case someone from the White House comes down with an offer, but she then quotes a leading Republican as saying that "a visit from the tooth fairy is more likely."

The budget battle is presented as though it were a boxing match or a football game where we are shown the fighting mood of each side, and the opponents are putting on a big show of how psyched they are for the conflict. However, this is not just a sport; it has an effect on people. At the end of both segments there are short additions about the impact of this battle on the President's trade mission to Japan, which will be cut short, and on government operations. The story on government services is accompanied by two multicolored charts listing the major negative impacts and which essential services will remain opened. This presentation is not quite the human impact story that Neuman, Just, and Crigler suggest. It is not, for instance, the story of a family being evicted because they could not apply for social security or an angry worker laid off because

a trade agreement was not reached with Japan. Yet the human impact frame is being evoked.

In light of the consequences, the conflict is presented as almost immoral and certainly silly. The moral judgment on the conflict is presented most directly through the words of others: the chaplain's futile prayer for divine intervention, the Republican's comment on the tooth fairy, and the vague "what anyone in this town will tell you." Neuman, Just, and Crigler point out that reporters rarely make the moral judgment themselves, but use quotations from others to express a judgmental attitude. That is certainly true in this case.

Strangely, the story never mentions that the conflict is about basic economic choices the country is facing. Behind the budget issues are issues about what we want our government to spend on, how much we want our government to cost, and who should pay for it. It would seem that of the five frames that Neuman, Just, and Crigler present, the economic frame should be the most important here. Perhaps this story could be framed even more fundamentally in terms of policy discussion: that is, a consideration of what we want our government to do and how it should do it. Policy discussion, however, seems so rare in news stories as not to be mentioned by Neuman, Just, and Crigler. As it is, even the economic frame is totally absent. In fact, in leading into the next story, Jennings dismisses the conflict between the President and Congress as economically irrelevant: "Despite the Budget crisis, it was another good day on Wall Street."

The conflict frame has overwhelmed the presentation of politics, with the politicians playing the role of combative opponents so that they can get their soundbites and pictures on the news. The political stories seem to have nothing to do with real issues, except that us ordinary folk are left powerlessly to absorb the impact. No wonder people are cynical. Even the reporters had a hard time keeping a straight face on this story. Then again, they are the ones who tell these stories, and we are the ones who watch them.

The Process Continues

As Sandra handed in her paper that Friday morning, she remembered how she had said just a few weeks before that these frames made perfect sense and were a natural way to talk about the news. She suddenly realized that she had switched her opinion entirely, that these weren't the only way to tell stories. At least for this story she wanted to hear more about the economics and policy choices of welfare, the military, and all the other areas in which the government spent money. Well, maybe which frames you chose did make a difference. She decided that she would think more about that later.

It took over a week for the teaching assistant to read and grade the papers (Thanksgiving gave everyone a break), but Sandra was pleased with the A she received. Even more, she was pleased with the steady string of marginal comments agreeing with what she said and with the final comment of the teaching assistant:

> *Your paper uses the analysis of the frames to go beyond the idea of frames. You show how the frames used in this case make us wonder about whether we are getting the full and real story. You show how the politicians themselves play to the frames in ways that distort government activity. You show that journalists in producing those frames also are cynical about them. And you show how this whole process of news production makes us all cynical about what we see of our government. Excellent work.*

On the final paper for the course, Sandra followed up on the topic of framing by examining the way futuristic talk about the Internet was framing current discussion of the media. Since she felt she now understood much more clearly what it meant to analyze something, she was much more confident when analyses were assigned in other classes. Thus this one paper was part of her continuing interaction with the class and part of her own process of growth.

Thinking About Student Writing

1. In the process of developing her essay, at various times Sandra Malowski came across different ideas, information, and methods that she would use in her final paper. She also developed her own thoughts and observations that she would later use. Go back over the story of Sandra's writing process and circle each place she ran across an idea or piece of information or developed an insight that she would use in her final paper. Where do each of these ideas, facts, observations, and methods come from? How does she use each in the final paper?
2. The first part of this chapter presents ten typical processes of writing, but notes that for different pieces of writing not all may appear, or be

in the same order, or be of the same importance. The processes may even circle back and repeat. Go over the story of Sandra Malowski's paper and note in the margin wherever you see one of the following processes at work. How important is each for Sandra's paper? How does she engage in each of the processes? How does each of the processes relate to other processes that come before and after it?

1. The process of unfolding situations
2. The process of putting your goals and the task in focus
3. The process of developing ideas
4. The process of finding and gathering resources
5. The process of thinking through your materials
6. The process of planning and organizing your statement
7. The process of producing text
8. The process of making your sources explicit
9. The process of examining and improving text
10. The process of receiving responses and moving on to the next statement

Writing for Reflection

1. Think of a paper or other piece of writing you recently wrote. Based on the various processes presented in this chapter (particularly the list of ten processes above), describe the processes that your paper was part of and the processes by which the paper was produced.
2. Interview someone working in a field in which you might be interested for your career, and ask about their writing process for a specific kind of writing they do on the job. Questions should cover not only the writing-up stage (planning, drafting, revising), but also the earlier processes of recognizing that they are in a situation calling for writing, of gathering information, of thinking through their ideas, and so on. Use the list of ten processes to help you develop interview questions. Then write up what you have found.

In a few paragraphs reflect on how the availability of word processors, spell checkers, and other electronic writing tools influences your writing process. How do you use these tools? Is your writing process different when electronic tools are not available? Which electronic tools do you not use? Is that by choice or because of lack of familiarity? How might you use electronic tools differently, more fully, or more effectively?