paper the instructor has in mind. Assume the instructor asks you to discuss the key ideas in an assigned reading. What exactly does the instructor want you to do? Should you include a brief summary of the selection? Should you compare the author's ideas with your own view of the subject? Should you determine if the author's view is supported by valid evidence? If you're not sure about an assignment, ask your instructor—not the student next to you, who may be as confused as you—to make the requirements clear. Most instructors are more than willing to provide an explanation. They would rather take a few minutes of class time to explain the assignment than spend hours reading dozens of student essays that miss the mark.

Second, find out how long the paper is expected to be. Many instructors will indicate the approximate length of the papers they assign. If no length requirements are provided, discuss with the instructor what you plan to cover and indicate how long you think your paper will be. The instructor will either give you the go-ahead or help you refine the direction and scope of your work.

Determine Your Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Point of View

Once you understand the requirements for a writing assignment, you're ready to begin thinking about the essay. What is its purpose? For what audience will it be written? What tone and point of view will you use? Later on, you may modify your decisions about these issues. That's fine. But you need to understand the way these considerations influence your work in the early phases of the writing process.

Purpose

Start by clarifying to yourself the essay's broad purpose. What do you want the essay to accomplish? The papers you write in college are usually meant to inform or explain, to convince or persuade, and sometimes to entertain.

In practice, writing often combines purposes. You might, for example, write an essay trying to convince people to support a new trash recycling program in your community. But before you win readers over, you most likely would have to explain something about current waste-disposal technology.

When purposes blend in this way, the predominant one influences the essay's content, organization, pattern of development, emphasis, and language. Assume you're writing about a political campaign. If your primary goal is to entertain, to take a gentle poke at two candidates, you might use the comparison-contrast pattern to organize your essay. You might, for example, start with several accounts of one candidate's "foot-in-mouth disease" and then describe the attempts of the other candidate, a multimillionaire, to portray himself as an average Joe. Your language, full of exaggeration, would reflect your objective. But if your primary purpose is to persuade readers that the candidates are incompetent and shouldn't be elected, you might adopt a serious, straightforward style. Selecting the argumentation-persuasion pattern to structure the essay, you might use one candidate's gaffes and the other's posturings to build a case that neither is worthy of public office.
Audience

Writing is a social act and thus implies a reader or an audience. To write effectively, you need to identify who your readers are and to take their expectations and needs into account. An essay about the artificial preservatives in the food served by the campus cafeteria would take one form if submitted to your chemistry professor and a very different form if written for the college newspaper. The chemistry paper would probably be formal and technical, complete with chemical formulations and scientific data: “Distillation revealed sodium benzoate particles suspended in a gelatinous medium.” But such technical material would be inappropriate in a newspaper column intended for general readers. In this case, you might provide specific examples of cafeteria foods containing additives—“Those deliciously smoky cold cuts are loaded with nitrates and nitrites, both known to cause cancer in laboratory animals”—and suggest ways to eat more healthfully—“Pass by the deli counter and fill up instead on vegetarian pizza and fruit juices.”

If you forget your readers, your essay can run into problems. Consider what happened when one student, Roger Salucci, submitted a draft of his essay to his instructor for feedback. The assignment was to write about an experience that demonstrated the value of education. Here’s the opening paragraph from Roger’s first draft:

When I received my first page as an EMT, I realized pretty quickly that all the weeks of KED and CPR training paid off. At first, when the call came in, it was nerve city for this guy, I can tell you. When the heat is on, my mind tends to go as blank as a TV screen at 2:00 a.m. in the morning. But I beat it to the van right away. After a couple of false turns, my partner and I finally got the right house and found a woman fibrillating and suffering severe myocardial arrhythmia. Despite our anxiety, our heads were on straight; we knew exactly what to do.

Roger’s instructor found his essay unclear because she knew nothing about being an EMT (Emergency Medical Technician). When writing the essay, Roger neglected to consider his audience; specifically, he forgot that college instructors are no more knowledgeable than anyone else about subjects outside their specialty. Roger’s instructor also commented that she was thrown off guard by the paper’s casual, slangy approach (“it was nerve city for this guy, I can tell you”; “I beat it to the van right away”). Roger used a breezy, colloquial style—almost as though he were chatting about the experience with friends—but the instructor had expected a more formal approach.

The more you know about your readers, the more you can adapt your writing to fit their needs and expectations. The accompanying checklist will help you analyze your audience.
Tone

Just as your voice may project a range of feelings, your writing can convey one or more tones, or emotional states: enthusiasm, anger, resignation, and so on. Tone isn’t a decorative adornment tacked on as an afterthought. Rather, tone is integral to meaning. It permeates writing and reflects your attitude toward yourself, your purpose, your subject, and your readers.

In everyday conversation, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and body gestures help convey tone. In writing, how do you project tone without these aids? You pay close attention to sentence structure and word choice. In Chapter 8, we present detailed strategies for finetuning sentences and words during the revision stage. Here we simply want to help you see that determining your tone should come early in the writing process because the tone you select influences the sentences and words you use later.

Sentence structure refers to the way sentences are shaped. Although the two paragraphs that follow deal with exactly the same subject, note how differences in sentence structure create sharply dissimilar tones:

During the 1960s, many inner-city minorities considered the police an occupying force and an oppressive agent of control. As a result, violence grew against police in poorer neighborhoods, as did the number of residents killed by police.


Informative in its approach, the first paragraph projects a neutral, almost dispassionate tone. The sentences are fairly long, and clear transitions (“During the 1960s”; “As a result”) mark the progression of thought. But the second paragraph,
with its dramatic, almost alarmist tone, seems intended to elicit a strong emotional
response; its short sentences, fragments, and abrupt transitions reflect the turbu­
lence of earlier times.

Word choice also plays a role in establishing the tone of an essay. Words have
denotations, neutral dictionary meanings, as well as connotations, emotional
associations that go beyond the literal meaning. The word beach, for instance, is
defined in the dictionary as “a nearly level stretch of pebbles and sand beside a
body of water.” This definition, however, doesn’t capture individual responses
to the word. For some, beach suggests warmth and relaxation; for others, it calls
up images of hospital waste and sewage washed up on a once-clean stretch
of shoreline.

Since tone and meaning are tightly bound, you must be sensitive to the emotional
nuances of words. Think about some of the terms denoting adult human female:
woman, chick, broad, member of the fair sex. While all of these words denote the same
thing, their connotations—the pictures they call up—are sharply different. Similarly,
in a respectful essay about police officers, you wouldn’t refer to cops, narcs, or flatfoots;
such terms convey a contempt inconsistent with the tone intended. Your words must
also convey tone clearly; otherwise, meaning is lost. Suppose you’re writing a
satirical piece criticizing a local beauty pageant. Dubbing the participants “livestock
on view” leaves no question about your tone. But if you simply referred to the
participants as “attractive young women,” readers might be unsure of your attitude.
Remember, readers can’t read your mind, only your paper.

Point of View

When you write, you speak to your audience as a unique individual. Point of
view reveals the person you decide to be as you write. Like tone, point of view is
closely tied to your purpose, audience, and subject. Imagine you want to convey
to students in your composition class the way your grandfather’s death—on your
eighth birthday—impressed you with life’s fragility. To capture that day’s impact
on you, you might tell what happened from the point of view of a child: “Today
is my birthday. I’m eight. Grandpa died an hour before I was supposed to have
my party.” Or you might choose instead to recount the event speaking as the adult
you are today: “My grandfather died an hour before my eighth birthday
party.”
Your point of view will obviously affect the essay’s content and organization.

The most strongly individualized point of view is the first person (I, me, mine,
we, us, our). Because it focuses on the writer, the first-person point of view is
appropriate in narrative and descriptive essays based on personal experience. It
also suits other types of essays (for example, causal analyses and process analy­
ses) when the bulk of evidence presented consists of personal observation. In such
essays, avoiding the first person often leads to stilted sentences like “There was
strong parental opposition to the decision” or “Although Organic Chemistry had
been dreaded, it became a passion.” In contrast, the sentences sound much more
natural when the first person is used: “Our parents strongly opposed the deci­
sion” and “Although I had dreaded Organic Chemistry, it became my passion.”

Like many students, you may feel that a lightning bolt will strike you if you use
the first person when writing. Indeed, in high school, you may have been warned
away from (even forbidden to use) the first person. And it does have its dangers. For one thing, in essays voicing an opinion, most first-person expressions ("I believe that . . ." and "In my opinion . . .") are unnecessary; the point of view stated is assumed to be the writer's unless another source is indicated. Second, in a paper intended to be an objective presentation of an issue, the first person distracts from the issue by drawing unwarranted attention to the writer: "I think it's important to realize that most violent crime in this country is directly related to substance abuse." By way of contrast, note how the matter under discussion is clearly highlighted when the first person is omitted: "Most violent crime in this country is directly related to substance abuse."

In some situations, writers use the second person (you, your, yours), alone or in combination with the first person. In fact, we frequently use forms of you in this book. For instance, we write, "If you're the kind of person who doodles while thinking, you may want to try mapping . . ." rather than "If a writer is the kind of person who doodles while thinking, he or she may want to try mapping . . ." As you can see, the second person simplifies style and involves the reader in a more personal way. You'll also find that the imperative form of the verb ("Send letters of protest to the television networks") engages readers in much the same way. The implied you speaks to the audience directly and lends immediacy to the directions. Despite these advantages, the second-person point of view often isn't appropriate in many college courses where more formal, less conversational writing is called for.

The third-person point of view is by far the most common in academic writing. The third person gets its name from the stance it conveys—that of an outsider or "third person" observing and reporting on matters of primarily public rather than private importance: "The international team of negotiators failed to resolve the border dispute between the two nations." In discussions of historical events, scientific phenomena, works of art, and the like, the third-person point of view conveys a feeling of distance and objectivity. When you write in the third person, though, don't adopt such a detached stance that you end up using a stiff, artificial style: "On this campus, approximately two-thirds of the student body is dependent on bicycles as the primary mode of transportation to class." Aim instead for a more natural and personable quality: "Two-thirds of the students on campus ride their bikes to class." (For a more detailed discussion of levels of formality, see pages 119-121 in Chapter 8.)

Discover Your Essay's Limited Subject

Once you have a firm grasp of the assignment's boundaries and have determined your purpose, audience, tone, and point of view, you're ready to focus on a limited subject of the general assignment. Because too broad a subject can result in a diffuse, rambling essay, be sure to restrict your general subject before starting to write.

The following examples show the difference between general subjects that are too broad for an essay and limited subjects that are appropriate and workable. The examples, of course, represent only a few among many possibilities.