number of contexts: family sitcoms, comedies that featured African American characters, the 1980s generally, sitcoms, working-parent shows, comedies that featured former stand-up comedians, and so on. The reason you put nontraditional texts, or all texts for that matter, into context is to gain perspective by looking at similar items. Typically, we think of context in historical or temporal terms—comparing a building to others built in the same era, for example—but context could also mean comparing all baseball stadiums in terms of their playability, seating, and vistas. Finally, context can also refer to genre—the "kind" of text it is. For instance, if you want to write about Metallica, you probably would not compare them to Kronos Quartet, Iron and Wine, or Celine Dion, because those acts are all operating in different genres. For the purposes of your paper, it would be most fruitful to place Metallica in context—perhaps reading them alongside AC/DC, Nirvana, or Kings of Leon.

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION, REGION, AGE—AND MORE

One's experiences affect one's perspective. As we see in Chapter 4, about race and ethnicity, and Chapter 6, concerning gender, people often write from the larger perspective of these groups, which have been historically discriminated against. But discrimination does not need to drive one's group perspective. Some examples can be found in our suite on Barack Obama images in the chapter on race. As a college student, you probably see things differently from your professor; if you come from a working-class background, you may see things from a different perspective than someone from a more wealthy background. In a famous essay on economic class, critic Michael Parenti reads *Pretty Woman* through the lens of class, arguing that the movie upholds traditional upper-class patriarchal values. On the opposite end, the wonderful British comedy *The Full Monty* can be read as a celebration of working-class men and women. You will see such readings throughout this book, both in the gender and race chapters but in other chapters as well. One of the funniest essays in *The World Is a Text* is Gantz's piece on *Seinfeld*, in which she reads the popular sitcom through the lens of queer theory.

ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

This book might be part of a course called "Writing Across the Disciplines." Although there are different definitions of what that means, generally it signals that your professor or department wants you to learn to write in your chosen discipline or major. Social scientists read texts differently than artists. Scientists approach information in a distinct way, as do semioticians, literary scholars, and cultural critics. In Chapter 1, physicist Brandon Brown reads a science lab. His lens is informed by an entirely different set of criteria than if an architect were reading the same lab or if the reader were an insurance adjuster. The accoutrement of disciplinary readings is vocabulary, prose style, and citation. Sometimes this simply means that you need to be attuned to the citation style of your discipline; English departments, for example, use the Modern Language Association style, known as MLA, whereas psychology departments use the American Psychology Association style, or APA. History departments often use Chicago (or Turabian), whereas other disciplines may have their own styles.

Disciplinary approaches can also affect issues of subjectivity and objectivity. For example, in literary studies, film studies, and media studies, writers often ground their writing in argument, interpretation, and insight. But, in many social sciences, soft sciences, and

the hard sciences, scholars rely on data and objective proof. Thus, a scientist, a film scholar, and a political scientist would each read Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* through three very different lenses, because they work in three utterly distinct disciplines.

But this might also mean a larger issue than of writing style or content. This book contains writing more focused on English-related subjects, but throughout, you find writings done in other disciplines as well. *The World Is a Text* is proud to offer a mix of various disciplinary readings, each reflecting the format of the field.

LANDING ON AN APPROACH: AN ENTRÉE TO THE ESSAY ITSELF

Your professor may have a specific approach in mind for you, but he or she may not. In general, the approach you take will probably mirror your own lenses. If you were raised on a farm in Ohio, you will likely always, in some way or another, look at people, places, and things through the Ohio-rural-farm lens. Thus, you may read a movie like *Field of Dreams* (even though it is set in Iowa) quite differently than a baseball player who grew up in Puerto Rico. As you try to land on an approach for your essay, think about what sort of lenses you tend to look through on a daily basis.

But we would also be lax if we did not suggest that such essential perspectives can be changed. For example, most people who live or work in Manhattan will tell you that New York has transformed them, has made them look at the world differently—even if they came from small towns in the Midwest. Perhaps more important is your willingness to try on approaches or lenses. One of the foremost experiences one of your authors had was learning about others developed, theoretical perspectives on the world around them; fellow graduate students were feminists, or had race-oriented perspectives, or were highly political, or had completely absorbed even more obscure perspectives. By trying to understand others' perspectives, both through reading and discussion, one can become a better reader of texts.

PART III. HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT POPULAR AND VISUAL CULTURE TEXTS? A TOUR THROUGH THE WRITING PROCESS

We begin by underscoring how important being a good reader is for the writing process. Both processes are about discovery, insight, ordering, and argument. The process of writing, however, differs from the product of writing. When we say product, we mean the produced or finished version—the completed paper that you submit to your instructor. The writing process is the always complex, sometimes arduous, often frustrating, and frequently rushed series of events that eventually lead you to the finished product. There are a lot of theories about writing, so we will not bore you with an overview of all of them. Chances are your instructor or your institution's writing center has a series of handouts or guidelines that will help you along the way, but we thought we would take you on a quick tour of what we see as the highlights of the writing process, with an added emphasis on building a good first paragraph and building sound arguments.

Of course, your process may not be exactly the same as this one nor might be the same for every assignment. In this edition, we have added a series of questions and answers with

our writers—they are scattered throughout the book. One thing that stands out in reading them together is how differently people approach assignments. For example, Katherine Gantz describes writing her essay about *Seinfeld* as a process that lasted almost a month, while Alessandro Portelli, writing about the country singer Loretta Lynn, said he wrote his essay with one big effort. You might imagine yourself more Portelli than Gantz, but the majority of our writers here said that writing an essay took time—from settling on an approach to a topic, doing research if appropriate, and then writing a draft. Some writers wrote a draft without stopping, while others stopped and edited along the way. But almost all the writers here got feedback from others, and even after we accepted them, some of them received feedback from us. The lesson we learned from reading our writers' comments about their process is that while everyone has an individual approach to writing, most recognized that constructing a paper is actually made up of several interrelated tasks that often overlap. You probably know this yourself from putting together your own paper.

That begins with understanding the assignment.

UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

This is usually the easiest part of the writing process, but it, too, is important. And because you are learning how to be savvy readers of various texts, this task should be easy for you. First, you should read the assignment for the paper as you would read a poem or an advertisement. Look for textual clues that seem particularly important. In fact, we recommend making a list of questions about the assignment itself, such as:

- What questions do I have to answer in order to complete or answer the assignment? Do I have a research or writing question that my paper must answer?
- Does my assignment contain any code words, such as "compare," "analyze," "research," "unpack," or "explore"? If so, what do these terms mean?
- What text or texts am I supposed to write about? Do I understand these texts?
- What is my audience? For whom am I writing?
- What are the parameters of the assignment? What can I do? What can I not do? Is there anything I do not understand before beginning?

One of the biggest mistakes students make is paying too little attention to the assignment. Like any text, it contains textual cues to help you understand it.

FREEWRITING AND BRAINSTORMING

Freewriting and brainstorming are crucial to the writing process because they generally produce your topic. Freewriting involves the random and uncensored act of writing down anything that comes into your mind on a particular topic. There are any number of ways to freewrite; some teachers and students like visually oriented methods, whereas others prefer a straightforward "Write all you can down in five minutes" approach. Some of our students set a stopwatch at two minutes, and within that two minutes, write down anything and everything that pops into their heads. When the two minutes are up, they review the list to see if any pattern or ideas emerge. From this list of random stuff, you can generally narrow down a topic. Let us say your assignment is to analyze the film *The Return of the King*, and you see that you jotted down several things that have to do with the way the movie looks. From that, you could decide that you want to write on the innovative "look" of the movie.

At this point, you can move on to brainstorming. Here, you take a blank piece of paper, or sit down in front of a blank computer screen, and write the topic of your paper across the top: The "look" of *The Return of the King*. Now, write down everything that pops into your head about the look of *The Return of the King*. See if you can come up with 10 to 20 ideas, observations, or questions. When you are done, look closely at your list. Does a pattern emerge? Are there certain questions or ideas that seem to fit together? Let us say you have written "cool effects," "lots of action," "scary creatures," "mythical overtones," "religious symbols," "good vs. evil," "darkness vs. light," "beautiful scenery," "the camera angles were very unique," "very serious," "it felt like fantasy," and "good wins, evil loses." Based on these observations, it looks like you could write a paper about good versus evil, or perhaps certain symbols in the film, like light and dark or white and black. Or, you could take things in a different direction and talk about how the "look" of the movie (camera angles, the setting, the colors, and the effects) make a certain argument or contribute to the theme in some way. Yet another possibility is to combine these observations into a paper that looks at the theme *and* the form.

The goal here is to try to home in on your topic—the overall subject of your paper. At this point, your topic does not have to be perfectly formulated, but you should be getting an idea of how you might narrow your topic down to something that you can feasibly write a paper about. It is possible—even likely—that as you start plotting an outline, a more defined topic will emerge.

OUTLINING

Once you have your topic, you need to organize your paper. Outlines are helpful because they provide a visual map of your paper so that you can see where you're going and where you have been. An outline is also useful in helping you see if your ideas fit together, if the paper is coherent, and if the paper is equally distributed among your various points. If you find yourself getting stuck or suffering from writer's block, an outline might help push you along. In addition, an outline presents your ideas in a logical format, and it shows the relationship among the various components of your paper.

The truth is that deciding on these various components is a process of trial and error. We change our minds all the time. So, as authors of this text, we are reluctant to say that one approach is better than another. Writing is always an organic process—that is, it grows at its own pace in its own way, and as a writer, you will likely need to adjust to accommodate where your ideas want to go.

No doubt, your instructor will talk a great deal about developing a **thesis** (which is the main argument or focus of your essay—what you argue about your topic), and he or she may encourage you to make this thesis part of your outline. This is a common strategy. The only problem is that you may make an outline with an idea of a thesis, finish the outline, and decide you need to change your thesis. At that point, you should make yet another outline. During the writing process, you may hone your thesis yet again, at which point, you will probably want to draft another outline so that you stay on course given your new thesis. Our point here is that there is no clearcut process when you are talking about the very fuzzy beginning stages of writing a paper. You should do whatever works for you—whatever leads to the most organized product.

Unlike most other books, we decided to combine a section on outlining and thesis-making because for us, the two go hand in hand. Most suggest that writers figure out a

thesis *before* doing an outline. Our experience, however, tells us that arriving at a thesis is often hard, and we do not always know exactly what we want to say about our topic until we get a visual map of the paper. In fact, most of the time, you arrive at your thesis after the first draft of the essay. Just remember that the first outline you make does not have to be the last outline—you can and should change it as you see fit.

Now, to that visual map. Traditionally, an outline states your topic (maybe states your thesis), enumerates your main points and supporting arguments in Roman numerals and, beneath the Roman numerals, lists your evidence in letters. For an essay with two main points, an outline might look something like this:

THE TITLE OF MY ESSAY

I. Introduction (1–2 paragraphs)
   Thesis: This is my thesis statement, if I have one at this point
II. My first point (2–4 paragraphs)
   a. My supporting evidence
   b. My supporting evidence
III. My second point (2–6 paragraphs)
   a. My supporting evidence
      1. Further evidence, graphs, statistics, perhaps
   b. My supporting evidence
      1. Further evidence
IV. My smart conclusion (1–2 paragraphs)

Notice how the outline helps flesh out an organizing idea, even if it is in the most general way. The final outline almost never matches up with the first version, but an outline can help you see the strengths and weaknesses of your organization, and it can help you think in an organized way.

Still, outlining in this manner may not suit everyone. Some students (and professors) do not like outlining, because they do not refer to the outline when writing, and they feel like the whole process is a waste of time. Others like to outline at various stages of writing; some outline after they have written a draft to make sure they have covered everything they wanted to cover. Those approaches are okay as well; so is writing an outline that is less formal in nature. At various times, we have written outlines that are barely outlines—just a mere list of points. Other times, we have written outlines with topic sentences of every one of our paragraphs. The approach you take will depend not only on class requirements, but also on the topic of your paper, your knowledge of the topic, and the amount of research required.

The reason we are committed to outlining is that it separates to some degree the thinking and composing stages of writing; if you know more or less what you want to say before you start putting words on paper, the more likely you are to write a clear and thoughtful draft, one that needs less extensive revision. The thinking aspect of outlining is why it is at once difficult and rewarding.

CONSTRUCTING A GOOD THESIS

Now that you have an idea of the work an outline can do, we can move on to helping you construct a **thesis**. As stated earlier, a thesis is the argument that you make about your topic. It is the main point, the assertion, you set forth in your essay.

We should say at the outset that the term "thesis" is only one possible term for the paper's argument. Some instructors like the term "claim," some like "focus," still others like "controlling idea." Regardless of what term you use, the concept is the same. The thesis is the idea you propose in your paper—it is not a statement of fact, but rather a claim, an idea.

The most important first step is to distinguish among a **topic**, **a thesis**, and **a thesis statement**. One of the great mistakes students make is that they assume a topic is a thesis. A topic is merely the avenue to the freeway that is the thesis, the appetizer to the main course. Let us say you are writing a paper about Affirmative Action. The topic is what you write about, which is Affirmative Action. Your thesis is the argument you make about Affirmative Action. Your thesis statement is the actual articulation, the statement or statements in which you unpack or explain your thesis. Now, a thesis statement does not have to be (nor should it be) one simplified sentence; in fact, it could and probably should be two or three sentences, or even a full paragraph. (A book can have a thesis statement that goes on for pages.)

We might break down these three components as follows:

Topic: What you are writing about (Affirmative Action)

Thesis: What you argue about your topic (Affirmative Action is a necessary law)

Thesis statement: The reason or explanation of your overall thesis—this usually appears in the first or second paragraph of your essay. For example: (Affirmative Action is a necessary law because it prevents discriminatory hiring practices. Minorities, women, people with disabilities, and gay and lesbian workers have suffered discrimination for decades. Affirmative Action not only redresses past wrongs, but also sets a level playing field for all job applicants. In short, it ensures democracy.)

Generally, the topic causes you the least anxiety. Your instructor will help you with your topic and may even provide one for you. In any case, you cannot start a paper without a topic.

The real task is figuring out your **thesis**. Many students feel anxious if they do not have a thesis when they begin the writing process, but that is normal, and in a way preferable in the quest to find a solid argument. Sometimes it is enough to have what we might refer to as a thesis question—a question that when answered through writing and research, actually reveals to you your thesis. Or you might have what we call a "working thesis," one that is too broad for a final paper, but is specific enough to guide you through the writing process. Often you must write a first draft of your essay before a thesis finally emerges. Remember that writing is exploration and discovery, so it may take some freewriting, brainstorming, outlining, and drafting before you land on a thesis. But stay with the process—you will eventually find what you want to say.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the thesis for students is the realization that a good thesis means you might be wrong. In fact, you know you are on the road to a good thesis if you think someone might be able to argue against your point. Writing is grounded in rhetoric, which, as we discussed earlier, is the art of persuasion. Your goal in your papers is not necessarily to change your audience's mind, but to get them to consider your ideas. Thus, your thesis needs to be something manageable, something reasonable that you can argue about with confidence and clarity.

The most effective strategy we found with helping our students understand a thesis is to use the example of the **hypothesis**. As most of you know, a **hypothesis** is an educated

guess. A thesis is the same thing. In Greek, thesis means "a proposition" or "an idea"; hypo is Greek for "under" or "beneath." So, literally, a hypothesis is a "proposition laid down." Your thesis is the same thing. It is not a fact; it is not a statement. It is an idea, a proposition that you lay down on paper and then set out to support. You are not absolutely sure that Affirmative Action is a necessary law, but you believe it is. You are pretty confident in your stance, but you also know that someone could write an essay arguing why Affirmative Action should be abolished. This possibility of disagreement is how you know you have a good thesis, because you must provide sound reasons and convincing examples to support your assertion about the necessity for Affirmative Action.

Why must a thesis be an educated guess? Because if a thesis is a statement of fact, there is literally nothing to argue. If your thesis is "Affirmative Action is a law that was designed to prevent discrimination," you have simply stated a fact. There is nothing at stake, nothing to debate. Even a thesis like "Affirmative Action is an important law" is rather weak. Virtually no one would suggest that Affirmative Action is not important. It has been extraordinarily important in American culture. So, again, that is not the best thesis you could come up with, although it remains better than our first example. However, arguing that it is a *necessary* law makes your thesis more provocative, more risky. Therefore, it is likely to draw interest and get people excited. Readers will want to see your reasons and think about the examples you provide.

Let us break it down even further, using an example from this book. Say you are writing about visual art. Your topic is censorship and the *Sensation* exhibit—our book features a reproduction of the painting exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum that prompted Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to threaten to shut down the exhibit—Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary*. We also print Diana Mack's discussion of the exhibition in the "Is It Art?" suite. Here are some sample theses for that topic.

Weak thesis: The *Sensation* exhibit in New York raised a lot of questions about censorship and public money.

This is a weak thesis statement because it is a statement of fact. No one would debate this point.

Better thesis: The *Sensation* exhibit in New York deserved to run its course despite public opinion.

This is a better thesis statement because it proposes something a bit controversial. Many people, including the mayor of New York at the time, could argue against this thesis. That tells you that you are on the right track.

Even better thesis: It is important that the *Sensation* exhibit in New York was allowed to happen without being censored, despite political opposition to the content of some of the pieces. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are critical parts of American ideas of liberty, and silencing works of art meant for public consumption is in violation of our most basic rights.

This thesis statement is even better because it provides a bit more precision, and it gives a reason for the author's stance. It is easier, then, for this writer to prove the thesis because the reason is already articulated. Homing in on a good thesis is the foundation for building a good paragraph—which, in turn, is the foundation for building a good essay.

BUILDING AN OPENING PARAGRAPH: A CASE STUDY

The opening paragraph for your essay does a great deal of work, both for your essay and for your audience. For your audience, it sets up your argument and informs them what is going to happen in the remaining pages. In the paper, it functions as the road map, pointing readers down certain avenues, and telling them to avoid others. If your reader is confused after the first paragraph, she may remain confused for a good bit of your essay, and that is never what you want.

An opening paragraph should do a number of things—it should engage the reader's interest with an entertaining or provocative opening sentence, and it should provide the road map for the rest of the paper. In addition, your opening paragraph is typically the home for your thesis statement (although some professors might have different preferences on whether your thesis must go in the first paragraph). It is also the face for your paper, so it should be well organized, moving from a general observation to the more-specific thesis statement (think of an upside down pyramid—broad going down to narrow). For the writer, the opening paragraph is critical because it provides the formula for working through the issues of the essay itself. A vague opener provides too little direction; a paragraph that tries to argue three or four different topics never gets on the right track; and a paragraph that does not make an argument has a tendency to go nowhere, because it keeps restating facts instead of staking out a position and making an argument.

The purpose of this section is to avoid these pitfalls. Here, we give you some models of opening paragraphs before and after revision to show you how a thorough revising process can improve your opening paragraph, strengthen your thesis, and provide a good entrée into your essay.

Let us say you are writing about the movie *Office Space*. You know that you like the movie. You think it is funny, and all of your friends think it is funny. During parties and over lunch, you trade lines with each other. You all agree that the movie speaks to your generation in some odd way, but you are having trouble figuring out *exactly* what you want to say about it. You decide (wisely) to make a list of all possible observations and some questions about those observations:

- *Office Space* speaks to people of my generation. (Why is this important?)
- *Office Space* is funny. (But that's not an argument). *Office Space* is the funniest movie of the last 5 years. (But how would I prove that?)
- *Office Space* makes a connection with college students like no other movie. (Is this true? What about *Lord of the Rings* or *Caddyshack*?)
- *Office Space* was not a huge box office hit, but it is wildly popular among college students. (Maybe its biggest audience is college students?)
- We like *Office Space* because it is funny.
- We like *Office Space* because it is about rebellion.
- It is anti-establishment, anti-corporate.
- Maybe we identify with it because it is also anti-institution, like school or college.
- *Office Space* appeals to college students because they can identify with the anti-institution theme. (But we are all part of institutions—school, jobs.)
- We like *Office Space* because it is anti-institution and yet not. (It is kind of subversive, but not *really*. The people in it are kind of lazy.)

This is a pretty good list. We can likely get some kind of argument from it.

The trick is finding something that is truly an argument. Saying that *Office Space* is funny is not much of an argument. Most would agree with this, and really, who cares if it is funny or not? That does not help us understand the movie any better. Arguing that college students like it is also overstating the obvious. The key is to explain why this particular movie appeals to college students at this particular time. Of course, one could talk about the fantasy of stealing a million dollars or getting a date with Jennifer Aniston, or the bigger fantasy of enjoying working construction over being in a cubicle, but those kinds of ideas occur in other movies. What sets this movie apart is the idea of being subversive (sort of) in an institutional setting. You want your paper to be unique, and you want it to tell your readers something they might actually find compelling. Readers can usually tell after an opening paragraph if there is anything in there for them, so as you craft your essay, ask yourself—Am I giving pertinent information? Is my argument interesting?

So, the first try at an opening paragraph might look like this:

> *Office Space,* directed by Mike Judge, has become a classic movie for college students. It's funny plot, it's witty dialogue and stance on corporate life appeals to students across disciplines and states. One might wonder why a movie that was not a box-office sensation has become a cult sensation among college students, but it's clear that *Office Space* appeals to students in a number of ways. Perhaps the biggest way is the movie's theme of rebellion. Students can identify with the movie's anti-corporate message.

Okay, so what do we see here? On a micro level, there are some problems with the prose: the rogue apostrophe in *it's* (first and second sentences) has to go; the phrase "across disciplines and states" is vague and not really helpful; "box-office sensation" is a cliché and also vague; "number of ways" also does not do much work. Still, there is also a great deal of information here to work with. The beginnings of our thesis probably rest in the last two sentences—it is there that we make our argument. On closer examination, however, it would appear that the last sentence is not really an argument. Almost no one would disagree with that statement, so proving it would be easy but, ultimately, pointless. Essays that merely sum up what everyone agrees with do little to further our understanding of the issue or topic at hand. From an entertainment perspective, a good opening paragraph needs to give us reasons to keep reading, so the next version should incorporate some reasons why the movie appeals to students. It should also be a bit more sophisticated and precise. So, in the next version, list some reasons the movie appeals to college students, and give the date of the film, for starters. And do a bit of research and see what you can come up with.

Draft two might come out like this:

> *Office Space* (1999), directed by Mike Judge of *Beavis and Butthead* fame, has become an underground classic among American college students. It is not uncommon to overhear students quoting entire passages from the movie, and there is even an *Office Space* drinking game. Though the movie features a couple of funny subplots involving dating and stealing a million dollars, the real draw of the movie lies in the fact that it is rather anti-establishment. The main character of the film does not simply quit his job—he actually stops working. What's more, he gets rewarded for it through a promotion. Thus, *Office Space* sends a message to college students that when they enter the same corporate environment, they too can be rewarded for rebelling against the corporate mindset.

Wow, what happened here? On one hand, the paragraph is much stronger. Notice the increased specificity: American college students, examples of how students enjoy the movie, more active verbs instead of being verbs (is, are); even some details from the movie itself. But, beyond all that, the thesis has gone off in a different direction! Our argument was that students relate to the movie's theme of rebellion; now, it would appear that we are arguing that students like the movie because they will get rewarded for rebelling. Is that what we want to argue? Is that the reason students like the movie? Does the appeal of the movie lie in the fact that students relate to it, or that it gives them hope? What if it is both? Is there a way to work both into the thesis? Generally, the more precise you are, and the more thorough your thesis is, the better; however, yours has gone off in a different direction! In truth, probably both things appeal to students, so why not strengthen the thesis and the essay by making arguments about both?

The resulting third draft:

> Mike Judge took slacking to new heights with his hilarious cartoon *Beavis and Butthead,* which chronicled the lives of two under-achieving teen-age boys who had a great deal of fun doing a great deal of nothing. Judge's first movie involving real humans is also about doing nothing, but this time it is recent college graduates who find themselves working in cubicles for a mind-numbing corporation. Despite the fact that *Office Space* (1999) was not a huge hit at the box office, it has become an underground classic across university campuses. Students quote entire scenes to each other from memory, *Office Space* T-shirts abound, and there is even an *Office Space* drinking game. One might wonder why a movie with no real stars except for Jennifer Aniston has made such an impact on this generation of students. Though there are some funny subplots involving dating and stealing a million dollars from a corporation, the main action of the movie comes when the main character, Peter, decides to stop working but winds up getting a promotion. Thus, the movie appeals to students not simply because it champions rebelling against the man, but it suggests one might get rewarded for doing so. On one hand, students identify with the desire to completely stop working, and they like the idea that things might turn out better for them if they do. Ultimately, students are drawn to *Office Space* because it tells them they can be anti-establishment and successful at the same time.

This version is better not because it is longer, but because it provides detail, it is precise, and it features a thorough three-sentence thesis statement. Readers know from this opening paragraph that we are going to read an essay that 1) makes an argument and 2) makes an argument about the two ways/reasons the movie appeals to college students.

Because we have a focused thesis, we can now go into a lot of detail in the rest of our paper about how and why students related to specific scenes and concepts, and we can also make some interesting observations about "safe rebellion" and rewards. From here on, the writing process involves "proving" and elaborating on the thesis we just wrote.

A note here on opening paragraphs: One of the authors believes that writing the opening paragraph should come closer to the end of the composing process rather than the beginning. Although getting a thesis early is important, writing an opening paragraph before you know what you want to say might mean you must extensively revise the paragraph or scrap it altogether. Some writers, however, need to "begin with beginning"—they cannot go on until they know exactly what their argument is going to be. Ultimately, your preference regarding the writing process is less important than the finished product.

Finally, avoid writing a clichéd introduction. Do not use phrases like "since the beginning of time," which is much too general and tells us little. Also, resist using a dictionary definition of an important word. These two strategies should almost never be used in college writing. If you want to use a time construction, confine it to specific knowable time,

such as "the recent past" or "in the 1990s." If you find yourself drifting toward a dictionary definition, try defining it yourself, looking in a more specialized source such as a book about the subject (but be careful to cite), or engaging the definition you find by arguing with it or refining it. *Never* write: "The dictionary defines [your subject here] as . . ." — there are many different dictionaries, all of which define words differently.

If you take your opening paragraph seriously, use it as a method of organization, and make it interesting, you will be off to a good start with your paper.

BUILDING GOOD PARAGRAPHS

Building a good paper is relatively simple, once you understand the formula. By formula, we do *not* necessarily mean a standard five-paragraph essay. Instead of thinking of your paper in terms of numbers of paragraphs, think in terms of **points** or **reasons**. By "points," we mean ideas, concepts, observations, or reasons that support the argument you make in your thesis. The units that help you organize these points are the paragraphs themselves. This section helps you get a handle on how to structure your paragraphs so that you make the most of your supporting points.

For a typical undergraduate paper, you do not want too many or too few points. If you are arguing about Affirmative Action, how many reasons do you want to include in your paper to support your thesis? Do you want seven? No, that's too many. One? That's too few. Generally, we suggest two to four points or reasons for a standard three- to six-page paper. For a longer paper, like a research paper, you may want four or five points to drive home your argument. But the danger of including too many points in your paper is that, unless you can supply ample evidence for each point, an overabundance of points winds up having the opposite of the intended effect. Rather than bolstering your argument by the sheer number of reasons, you tend to weaken your argument because you dilute your points through an overabundance of reasons and a lack of evidence. In other words, it is better to write three or four paragraphs for one or two points than to write five paragraphs for five points. Write more about less as opposed to less about more.

The key to making and supporting your assertions is the paragraph. Paragraphs are the infrastructure of your essay; they frame and support the arguments you make. Every paragraph is like a mini-essay. Just as your essay has a thesis statement, so does your paragraph have a **topic sentence**—a sentence in which you lay out the main idea for that paragraph. Once you write your topic sentence, then you have to provide evidence to support the claim you have made in your topic sentence. Each paragraph has its own topic and its own mini-assertion, and when taken together, all of these paragraphs work together to support the overall thesis of the entire essay.

Topic sentences should establish the mini-argument of your paragraph. Try to make them assertive and focused, because they serve as a small map to the theme of your paragraph. Some examples:

Weak topic sentence: This is a plan one finds in the library.

Weak topic sentence: *Family Guy* first aired in 2002.

These are weak topic sentences because they simply state facts rather than advance an argument. Note the topic sentences of the previous two paragraphs. Neither are over-the-top in terms of making an argument, but they both make assertions. Following are topic sentences from a freshman essay on the overuse of medication in the United States:

- The increasing over-use of medication has been made possible by the "quick-fix" mentality that has become prevalent in our society.
- A big factor leading to the increasing amount of over-medication is the rampant advertising of new drugs by the pharmaceutical companies.
- In addition to our desire for quick and easy solutions, America's preoccupation with youth and physical perfection is also to blame in the overflow of drug consumption in our society.

This last example is particularly good because it includes a **transition** ("**in addition to our desire for quick and easy solutions**") in the topic sentence. The topic of the preceding paragraph focuses on America's desire for quick and easy solutions, and the author used the topic sentence not only to advance her idea about youth and physical perfection, but she also reminded the reader of her previous topic, making her overall argument feel connected, part of a piece. Remember—make assertions in your topic sentences.

Once you have a clear, focused topic sentence, it is time to move on to the rest of your paragraph. For instance, say your topic sentence is: "The *Sensation* exhibit was an important test for American culture because First Amendment rights were at stake." What might be your next move? You should probably quote the First Amendment, or at least part of it. Then, explain how the *Sensation* exhibit was protected by the First Amendment. Give examples of specific pieces from the show that are pertinent to this discussion. This is also the right time to bring in quotes from other people that support your assertions. If you quote from another source, or if you quote from a primary text, be sure you explain how the passage you quote supports your thesis. (And, of course, cite the quote's origin.) The quote cannot explain itself—you must tell your audience why that quote is important, why and how the statistics you include are evidence the reader should pay attention to.

Finally, end your paragraphs well. The most common mistake students make when writing paragraphs is that they tend to trail off. Make that last sentence a kind of connector—make it tie everything in the paragraph back to the topic sentence. When possible, also reinforce the fact that your paragraphs are working together by writing transition sentences from one paragraph to the next. For example, a good transition in the essay on the *Sensation* exhibit would acknowledge the topic of the preceding paragraph and lead into the topic for the paragraph at hand. Such a sentence might look like this: "Not only did the *Sensation* exhibit reinforce First Amendment rights of the artists, it underscored the right of viewers and museum-goers to enjoy art their tax dollars helped support." Note how this sentence refers to the subject of the previous paragraph (artistic freedom) and also how it informs us of the topic we are about to engage (publicly funded art).

Start on your next paragraph with the same model. Keep doing this until you have built yourself a paper. Then go back and revise and edit, revise and edit, revise and edit. The key to building good paragraphs is using them to make arguments. The next section walks you through that process.

DRAFTING THE WHOLE ESSAY

Although we spend a great deal of energy explaining various strategies for composing a paper, it still comes down to the actual work of thinking about a topic, doing your own method of prewriting (outlining, brainstorming, etc.), and putting the words on paper. In other words, you still have to write that first draft.

Sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph, you start building your paper. Remember to give as much detail as possible. Include examples from the text you are writing about, and try to avoid plot summary or unnecessary description. Remember: *Analyze, do not summarize.* In other words, do not simply provide information—make sense of information for us.

Once you finish your first draft, you may discover that buried somewhere in your closing paragraph is the very good articulation of the thesis you have been trying to prove for several pages. This happens because, as we have said, writing is a discovery process. So by working through your ideas, your arguments, your textual examples, you start to focus on what you have been trying to say all along.

Now that you have a better idea of what you want to say, it is time for the real work—editing and revising.

EDITING AND REVISING, EDITING AND REVISING, EDITING AND REVISING

The single biggest mistake student writers make is turning in their first draft. The first draft is often little more than a blueprint—it is merely an experiment. In the editing and revising stage, you convert the process of writing into the written product. Here, you turn a bad paper into a decent one, or a good paper into a great one. You can clear up confusing sentences, focus your argument, correct bad grammar, and, most important, make your paper clearer and more thorough. Students think that they are good writers if papers come easily. This is the biggest myth in writing. A good paper happens through several stabs at editing and revising.

There are a number of strategies for editing and revising, so we'll give you a couple of our favorites. First, when you are ready to edit and revise, read your paper through backward. Start at the very end, and read it backward, one sentence at a time. This forces you to slow down and see the sentence as its own entity. It is probably the most useful strategy for correcting your own writing. Even more helpful is getting a peer to read your paper. Another person can point out errors, inconsistencies, or vague statements that you may miss because you are too close to the process. An often painful but very effective way of editing is reading your paper out loud. The authors often do this, especially when presenting their work to other people.

Finally, we also recommend that although you may write hot, you should edit cold. What we mean by this is that you need to step back from your paper when you edit. Look at it objectively. Try not to get caught up in your prose or your argument. Work on being succinct and clear. Practically, this means not working on your paper for a period of time, even if that period is hours, not days. As professors, we are well aware that you may wait until the last minute to write a paper. Although we are not endorsing this way of composing, you still need to find a way to step away from the paper and come back to it to get some perspective on what you have written.

This is also the time go to back over the arguments you made. (Here we introduce some terms that you see again in the upcoming "A Guide for Building Arguments" section.) Look at your **logos** and **pathos**—are they appropriate? Have you made argumentative errors? Are you guilty of using fallacies? Do you supply enough good evidence to support your assertions? Do you end your paragraphs well?

It may take several drafts (in fact, it should) before you feel comfortable with your paper. So, we recommend at least three different passes at editing and revising before turning in your paper. We advocate going back over and looking at your language one last time. Do not use words that are not part of your vocabulary; try to avoid stating the obvious. Be original, be honest, and be engaged. We urge you, above all else, to think complexly, but write simply. A note here from one of the authors: In writing a recent book, he has, conservatively, rewritten his introduction to a chapter more than thirty times. Revising is often a great deal of work, and sometimes rewriting takes multiple drafts.

Finally, we want to reiterate here that writing is not easy or simple for anyone. Although you may think that you are not a strong writer, and that others write more easily and naturally, the truth is that all "good" writers spend a significant amount of time revising their work. In fact, most good writers enjoy this part of the composing process, because it is the time when they see their writing actually turn into something worth sharing with someone else.

TURNING IN THE FINISHED PRODUCT

The most enjoyable part of the process! Double check spelling and grammar issues. If you did a research paper, check your citations and go over your Bibliography or Works Cited pages. Confirm you did *not* plagiarize.

Turn in the paper and go celebrate!

SOME FINAL TIPS–A RECAP

- Distinguish between a topic and a thesis.
- Your thesis does not have to be one concise sentence; it can be several sentences, perhaps even an entire paragraph. It might even be helpful to think of your thesis as your focus, your idea that you are trying to support.
- "Thesis" comes from "hypothesis." A hypothesis is an educated guess. So is your thesis. It is an educated guess, an idea that you are trying to support. You do not have to develop an over-the-top airtight argument; you simply want your reader to consider your point of view.
- Writing is conversation; it is dialogue. Keep asking questions of yourself, your writing, and your topic. Ask yourself, "Why is this so?" Make sure you answer. Be specific; be thorough.
- Consider your audience. You should never assume they have read the text you are writing about, so do not toss around names or scenes without explaining them a little. It is called "giving context." There is a big difference between giving context (valuable information) and summarizing the plot (regurgitation).
- Make good arguments. Use logos, pathos, and ethos appropriately. Try to avoid fallacies.