The strongly argumentative thesis is used to organize papers and exam questions that call for information, analysis, and the writer's forcefully stated point of view (e.g., “Evaluate the proposed reforms of health maintenance organizations”).

The strongly argumentative thesis, of course, is the riskiest of the three because you must state your position forcefully and make it appear reasonable—which requires that you offer evidence and defend against logical objections. But such intellectual risks pay dividends, and if you become involved enough in your work to make challenging assertions, you will provoke challenging responses that enliven classroom discussions as well as your own learning.

This thesis therefore helps you plan the paper, which should include a section on each of the four topics. Assuming that the argument follows the organizational plan we've proposed, the working thesis would become the final thesis. Based on this thesis, a reader could anticipate sections of the paper to come. A focused thesis therefore becomes an essential tool for guiding readers.

At this stage, however, your thesis is still provisional. It may turn out that as you do research or begin drafting, the paper to which this thesis commits you looks to be too long and complex. You may therefore decide to drop the second clause of the thesis (concerning the country's vulnerability to economic dislocations) and focus instead on the need for the government to subsidize the development of fuel-cell vehicles and a hydrogen infrastructure, relegating the economic concerns to your conclusion (if at all). With such a change, your final thesis might read: “The federal government should subsidize the development of fuel-cell vehicles as well as the hydrogen infrastructure needed to support them.”

This revised thesis makes an assertive commitment to the subject even though the assertion is not as complex as the original. Still, it is more argumentative than the second proposed thesis:

To reduce our dependence on nonrenewable fossil fuel energy sources, the federal government should encourage the development of fuel-cell vehicles.

Here we have a mildly argumentative thesis that enables the writer to express an opinion. We infer from the use of the words “should encourage” that the writer endorses the idea of the government's promoting fuel-cell development. But a government that “encourages” development is making a lesser commitment than one that “subsidizes,” which means that it allocates funds for a specific policy. So the writer who argues for mere encouragement takes a milder position than the one who argues for subsidies. Note also the contrast between the second thesis and the first one, in which the writer is committed to no involvement in the debate and suggests no government involvement whatsoever:

Fuel-cell technology has emerged as a promising approach to developing energy-efficient vehicles.

This, the first of the three thesis statements, is explanatory, or informative. In developing a paper based on this thesis, the writer is committed only to explaining how fuel-cell technology works and why it is a promising approach to energy-efficient vehicles. Given this thesis, a reader would not expect to find the writer strongly recommending, for instance, that fuel-cell engines replace internal combustion engines in the near future. Neither does the thesis require the writer to defend a personal opinion; he or she need only justify the use of the relatively mild term promising.

In sum, for any topic you might explore in a paper, you can make any number of assertions—some relatively simple, some complex. On the basis of these assertions, you set yourself an agenda for your writing—and readers set for themselves expectations for reading. The more ambitious the thesis, the more complex will be the paper and the greater the readers' expectations.

To review: A thesis (a one-sentence summary of your paper) helps you organize your discussion and helps your reader anticipate it. Theses are distinguished by their carefully worded subjects and predicates, which should be just broad and complex enough to be developed within the length limitations of the assignment. Both novices and experts typically begin the initial draft of a paper with a working thesis—a statement that provides writers with sufficient structure to get started but latitude enough to discover what they want to say as they write. Once you have completed a first draft, you test the “fit” of your thesis with what you have written. If the fit is good, every element of the thesis will be developed in the paper that follows. Discussions that drift from your thesis should be deleted or the thesis revised to accommodate the new discussions. These revision concerns will be more fully addressed when we consider the revision stage of the writing process.

**Exercise 6.4**

Drafting Thesis Statements

After completing the group exercise in narrowing a subject (Exercise 6.2, p. 209) and the individual invention exercise (Exercise 6.3, p. 211), work individually or in small groups to draft three theses based on your earlier ideas: one explanatory thesis, one mildly argumentative thesis, and one strongly argumentative thesis.
Next, make several assertions about your topic, in order of increasing complexity, as in the following:

1. Fuel-cell technology has emerged as a promising approach to developing energy-efficient vehicles.
2. To reduce our dependence on nonrenewable fossil fuel, the federal government should encourage the development of fuel-cell vehicles.
3. The federal government should subsidize the development of fuel-cell vehicles as well as the hydrogen infrastructure needed to support them; otherwise, the United States will be increasingly vulnerable to recession and other economic dislocations resulting from our dependence on the continued flow of foreign oil.

Keep in mind that these are working theses. Because you haven’t begun a paper based on any of them, they remain hypotheses to be tested. You might choose one and use it to focus your initial draft. After completing a first draft, you would revise it by comparing the contents of the paper to the thesis and making adjustments as necessary for unity. The working thesis is an excellent tool for planning broad sections of the paper, but—again—don’t let it prevent you from pursuing related discussions as they occur to you.

Starting with a Working Thesis

As a student, you are not yet an expert on the subjects of your papers and therefore don’t usually have the luxury of beginning writing tasks with a definite thesis in mind. But let’s assume that you do have an area of expertise, that you are in your own right a professional (albeit not in academic matters). We’ll assume that you understand some nonacademic subject—say, backpacking—and have been given a clear purpose for writing: to discuss the relative merits of backpack designs. Your job is to write a recommendation for the owner of a sporting-goods chain, suggesting which line of backpacks the chain should carry. Because you already know a good deal about backpacks, you may have some well-developed ideas on the subject before you start doing additional research.

Yet even as an expert in your field, you will find that crafting a thesis is challenging. After all, a thesis is a summary, and it is difficult to summarize a presentation yet to be written—especially if you plan to discover what you want to say during the process of writing. Even if you know your material well, the best you can do at first is to formulate a working thesis—a hypothesis of sorts, a well-informed hunch about your topic and the claim you intend to make about it. After completing a draft, you can evaluate the degree to which your working thesis accurately summarizes the content of your paper. If the match is a good one, the working thesis becomes the final thesis. But if sections of the paper drift from the focus of the working thesis, you’ll need to revise the thesis and the paper itself to ensure that the presentation is unified. (You’ll know that the match between content and thesis is good when every paragraph directly refers to and develops some element of the thesis.) Later in this chapter we’ll discuss useful revision techniques for establishing unity in your work.

This model works whether dealing with a subject in your area of expertise—backpacking, for example—or one that is more in your instructor’s territory, such as government policy or medieval poetry. The difference is that when approaching subjects that are less familiar to you, you’ll likely spend more time gathering data and brainstorming in order to make assertions about your subject.

Using the Thesis to Plan a Structure

A working thesis will help you sketch the structure of your paper because an effective structure flows directly from the thesis. Consider, for example, the third thesis (see p. 214) on fuel-cell technology:

The federal government should subsidize the development of fuel-cell vehicles as well as the hydrogen infrastructure needed to support them; otherwise, the United States will be increasingly vulnerable to recession and other economic dislocations resulting from our dependence on the continued flow of foreign oil.

This thesis is strongly argumentative, or persuasive. The economic crises mentioned suggest urgency in the need for the solution recommended: the federal subsidy of a national hydrogen infrastructure to support fuel-cell vehicles. A well-developed paper based on this thesis would require you to commit yourself to explaining (1) why fuel-cell vehicles are a preferred alternative to gasoline-powered vehicles; (2) why fuel-cell vehicles require a hydrogen infrastructure (i.e., you must explain that fuel cells produce power by mixing hydrogen and oxygen, generating both electricity and water in the process); (3) why the government needs to subsidize industry in developing fuel-cell vehicles; and (4) how continued reliance on fossil fuel technology could make the country vulnerable to economic dislocations.

How Ambitious Should Your Thesis Be?

Writing tasks vary according to the nature of the thesis.

- The explanatory thesis is often developed in response to short-answer exam questions that call for information, not analysis (e.g., “How does James Barber categorize the main types of presidential personality?”).

- The mildly argumentative thesis is appropriate for organizing reports (even lengthy ones), as well as for essay questions that call for some analysis (e.g., “Discuss the qualities of a good speech”).

(continues)
Writing a Thesis

A thesis, as we have seen, is a one- or two-sentence summary of a paper’s content. Whether explanatory, mildly argumentative, or strongly argumentative, the thesis is an assertion about that content—for instance, what the content is, how it works, what it means, if it is valuable, if action should be taken, and so on. A paper’s thesis is similar to its conclusion, but it lacks the conclusion’s concern for broad implications and significance. The thesis is the product of your thinking; it therefore represents your conclusion about the topic on which you’re writing. So you have to have spent some time thinking about this conclusion (that is, during the invention stage) in order to arrive at the thesis that will govern your paper.

For a writer in the drafting stages, the thesis establishes a focus, a basis which to include or exclude information. For the reader of a finished product, the thesis forecasts the author’s discussion. A thesis, therefore, is an essential tool for both writers and readers of academic papers.

The Components of a Thesis

In any other sentence, a thesis includes a subject and a predicate that makes an assertion about the subject. In the sentence “Lee and Grant were frequent kinds of generals,” “Lee and Grant” is the subject and “were frequent kinds of generals” is the predicate. What distinguishes a thesis from any other sentence with a subject and a predicate is that the thesis presents the central idea of the paper. The subject of a thesis, and the assertion about it, must present the right balance between the general and the specific to allow a thorough discussion within the allotted length of the paper. The discussion might include definitions, details, comparisons, contrasts—whatever is needed to illuminate a subject and support the assertion. (If the sentence about Lee and Grant were a thesis, the reader would assume that the rest of the paper contained comparisons and contrasts between the two generals.)

Bear in mind when writing theses that the more general your subject and the more complex your assertion, the longer your discussion must be to cover the subject adequately. The broadest theses require book-length treatments, as in this case:

Meaningful energy conservation requires a shrewd application of political, financial, and scientific will.

You couldn’t write an effective ten-page paper based on this thesis. The topic alone would require pages just to define what you mean by “energy conservation” and “meaningful.” Energy can be conserved in homes, vehicles, industries, appliances, and power plants, and each of these areas would need consideration. Having accomplished this first task of definition, you would then turn your attention to the claim, which entails a discussion of how politics, finance, and science individually and collectively influence energy conservation. Moreover, the thesis requires you to argue that “shrewd application” of politics, finance, and science is required. The thesis may be well-argued and compelling. Yet it promises entirely too much for a ten-page paper.

So to write an effective thesis and therefore a controlled, effective paper, you need to limit your subject and your claims about it. We discussed narrowing your subject during the invention stage (pp. 206–211); this narrowing process should help you arrive at a manageable topic for your paper. You will convert that topic to a thesis when you make an assertion about it—a claim that you will explain and support in the paper.

Making an Assertion

Thesis statements make an assertion or claim about your paper’s topic. If you have spent enough time reading and gathering information and brainstorming ideas about the assignment, you’ll be knowledgeable enough to have something to say based on a combination of your own thinking and the thinking of your sources.

If you have trouble coming up with such an assertion, devote more time to invention strategies: Try writing your subject at the top of a page and then listing everything you now know and feel about it. Often from such a list you’ll venture an assertion you can then use to fashion a working thesis. One good way to gauge the reasonableness of your claim is to see what other authors have asserted about the same topic. Keeping good notes on the views of others will provide you with a useful counterpoint to your own views as you write and think about your claim, and you may want to use those notes in your paper.
Outlining

A more structured version of a list, an outline groups ideas in hierarchical order, with main points broken into subordinate points, sometimes indicating evidence in support of these points. Use outlines as a first stage in generating ideas during your invention process or as a second step in invention. After freewriting and/or listing, refine and build on your ideas by inserting them into an outline for a workable structure in which you can discuss the ideas you've brainstormed. (See the example of an outline on pp. 138–139.)

Clustering and Branching

These two methods of invention are more graphic, nonlinear versions of listing and outlining. With both clustering and branching, you start with an assignment's main topic or with an idea generated by freewriting or listing, and you brainstorm related ideas that flow from that main idea. Clustering involves writing an idea in the middle of a page and circling it; you then draw lines leading from that circle, or “bubble,” to new bubbles containing subtopics of the central idea. Picking the subtopics that interest you most, draw lines leading to more bubbles in which you note important aspects of the subtopics. (See illustration below.)

Branching follows the same principle, but instead of placing ideas in bubbles, you write them on lines that branch off to other lines that, in turn, contain the related subtopics of your larger topic.

Clustering and branching are useful first steps in invention, for each helps isolate the topics about which you are most knowledgeable. As you branch off into the subtopics of a main paper topic, the number of ideas you generate in relation to these topics will help show where you have the most knowledge and/or interest.

You can modify and combine invention techniques in a number of ways. There is no one right way to generate ideas—or to write a paper—and every writer will want to try different methods to find those that work best. What's important to remember is that regardless of the method, the time spent on invention creates the conditions for writing a solid first draft.

Exercise 6.3

Practice Invention Strategies

After completing the group exercise (Exercise 6.2, p. 209) in which you narrowed a subject, work individually to brainstorm ideas about the subject your group chose. Use one of the invention strategies listed above—preferably one that you haven't used before. After brainstorming on your own, meet with your group again to compare the ideas you each generated.

**STAGE 4: DRAFTING**

It's usually best to begin drafting a paper after you've settled on at least a working or preliminary thesis. While consulting the fruits of your efforts during invention (notes, lists, outlines, and so on), you'll face a number of choices about how to proceed with drafting your paper. Let's consider some of those choices, including the crucial step of drafting the thesis.

**Strategies for Writing the Paper**

Some people can sit down very early in the process and put their ideas into an orderly form as they write. This drafting method results in a completed rough draft. But even professional writers rarely produce an adequate piece of writing the first time around. Most need to plan the structure of a paper before they can sit down to write a first draft. Even if this initial structure proves to be little more than a sketch that changes markedly as the paper develops, some sort of scaffolding usually helps in taking the step from planning to writing a first draft.

Ultimately, you will decide how best to proceed. And don't be surprised if you begin different writing projects differently. Whether you jump in without a plan, plan rigorously, or commit yourself to the briefest preliminary sketch, ask yourself:

- What's the main point of my paper?
- What subpoints do I need to address in order to develop and support my main point?
- In what order should my points be arranged? (Do certain subpoints lead naturally to others?)

At Stage 3, as you clarify the direction in which you believe your paper is heading, you ought to be able to formulate at least a preliminary thesis
When? How? Why?

These questions will occur to you as you conduct your research and notice the ways in which various authors have focused their discussions. Having read several sources on energy conservation and having decided that you’d like to use them, you might limit the subject by asking which aspects and deciding to focus on energy conservation as it relates to motor vehicles.

The Myth of Talent

Many inexperienced writers believe that you either have writing talent or you don’t, and that if you don’t, you are fated to go through life as a “bad writer.” But again, hard work, rather than talent, is what leads to competent writing. Yes, some people have more natural verbal ability than others—we all have our areas of strength and weakness. But in any endeavor, talent alone can’t ensure success, and with hard work, writers who don’t yet have much confidence can achieve impressive results. Not everyone can be a brilliant writer, but everyone can be a competent writer.

Certainly, “energy-efficient vehicles” offers a more specific focus than does “energy conservation.” Still, the revised focus is too broad for a ten-page paper. (One can easily imagine several book-length works on the subject.) So again, you try to limit your subject by posing other questions from the same list. You might ask which types of energy-efficient vehicles are possible and feasible and how auto manufacturers can be encouraged to develop them. In response to these questions, you may jot down preliminary notes:

- Types of energy-efficient vehicles
  - All-electric vehicles
  - Hybrid (combination of gasoline and electric) vehicles
  - Fuel-cell vehicles

- Government action to encourage development of energy-efficient vehicles
  - Mandates to automakers to build minimum quantities of energy-efficient vehicles by certain deadlines
  - Additional taxes imposed on high-mileage vehicles
  - Subsidies to developers of energy-efficient vehicles

Focusing on any one of these aspects as an approach to encouraging the use of energy-efficient vehicles could provide the focus of a ten-page paper.

Invention Strategies

You may already be familiar with a variety of strategies for thinking through your ideas. Here are four of these strategies:

Directed Freewriting

To freewrite is to let your mind go and write spontaneously, often for a set amount of time or a set number of pages. The process of “just writing” can often free up thoughts and ideas about which we aren’t even fully conscious of that we haven’t articulated to ourselves. In directed freewriting, you focus on a subject and let what you think and know about the subject flow out of you in a focused stream of ideas. As a first step in the invention stage, you might sit down with an assignment and write continuously for fifteen minutes. If even one solid idea comes through, you’ve succeeded in using freewriting to help “free up” your thinking. As a second step, you might take that one idea and freewrite about it, shift to a different invention strategy to explore that one idea, or even begin to draft a thesis and then a rough draft, depending on how well formed your idea is at this stage.

Listing

Some writers find it helpful to make lists of their ideas, breaking significant ideas into sublists and seeing where they lead. Approach this strat-egy as a form of freewriting; let your mind go, and jot down words and phrases that are related. Create lists by pulling related ideas out of your notes or your course readings. A caution: The linear nature of lists can lead you to jump prematurely into planning your paper’s structure before working out your ideas. Instead, list ideas as a way of brainstorming, and then generate another list that works out the best structure for your points in a draft.
is quantifiable. For example, interviews recorded by a social scientist are also considered to be data. In the humanities, data can refer to the qualitative observations one makes of a particular art object that one is interpreting or evaluating. Generally, quantitative data encompasses issues of “how many?” or “how often?”, whereas qualitative research accounts for such issues as “what kind?” and “why?”

Primary and Secondary Sources

Whether quantitative or qualitative, the kind of information that a researcher gathers directly by using the research methods appropriate to that particular field of study—experiments or observations in the sciences, surveys or interviews in the social sciences, close reading and interpretation of unpublished documents and literary texts or works of art in the humanities—is considered primary data. As an undergraduate, you will more commonly collect secondary data: information and ideas collected or generated by others who have performed their own primary and/or secondary research. The data gathering for most undergraduate academic writing involves library research and, increasingly, research conducted online via Internet databases and other resources.

Chapter 7 provides an in-depth discussion of locating and using secondary sources. Refer also to the material in Chapters 1 and 2 on summary, critical reading, and critique; the techniques of critical reading and assessment of sources will help you make the best use of your sources. And the material in Chapter 1 on avoiding plagiarism will help you conform to the highest ethical standards in your research and writing.

■ STAGE 3: INVENTION

Your preliminary data gathering completed, you can now frame your writing project: give it scope, develop your main idea, and create conditions for productive writing. You must define what you are writing about, after all, and you do this in the invention stage. This stage might also be termed “brainstorming” or “predrafting.” Regardless of the name, invention is an important part of the process that typically overlaps with data gathering. The preliminary data you gather on a topic will inform the choices you make in defining (that is, in “inventing” ideas for) your project. As you invent, you will often return to gather more data.

Writers sometimes skip the invention stage, preferring to save time by launching directly from gathering data into writing a draft. This is a serious mistake. Time spent narrowing your ideas to a manageable scope at the beginning of a project will pay dividends all through the writing process. Papers head down the wrong track when writers choose topics that are too broad (resulting in the superficial treatment of subtopics) or too narrow (resulting in writers “padding” their work to meet a length requirement).

Some people believe that good writing comes primarily from a kind of magical—and unpredictable—formation of ideas that occurs as one sits down in front of a blank page or computer screen. According to this myth, a writer must be inspired in order to write, as if receiving his or her ideas from some muse. While some element of inspiration may inform your writing, most of the time it is hard work—especially in the invention stage—that gets the job done. The old adage attributed to Thomas Edison—“Invention is one part inspiration and ninety-nine parts perspiration”—applies here.

Choosing and Narrowing Your Subject

Suppose you have been assigned a ten-page paper in an introductory course on environmental science. The assignment is open ended, so not only do you need to choose a subject, you also need to narrow it sufficiently and formulate your thesis.

Where will you begin?

First, you need to select broad subject matter from the course and become knowledgeable about its general features. But what if no broad area of interest occurs to you?

- Work through the syllabus or your textbook(s). Identify topics that sparked your interest.
- Review course notes and pay especially close attention to lectures that held your interest.
- Scan recent newspapers and newsmagazines that bear on your coursework.

Assume for your course in environmental science that you’ve settled on the broad subject of energy conservation. At this point, the goal of your research is to limit this subject to a manageable scope. A subject can be limited in at least two ways. First, you can seek out a general article (perhaps an encyclopedia entry, though it would not typically be accepted as a source in a college-level paper). A general article may do the work for you by breaking the larger topic down into smaller subtopics that you can explore and, perhaps, limit even further. Second, you can limit a subject by asking questions about it:

Who?
Which aspects?
Where?

(continues)
revise and invent a new (or slightly new) plan as you write. Expect to discover key parts of your paper as you write.

- Revision: Rewrite in order to make the draft coherent and unified.
  Revise at the global level, reshaping your thesis and adding to, rearranging, or deleting paragraphs in order to support the thesis. Gather more data as needed to flesh out paragraphs in support of the thesis.
  Revise at the local level of paragraphs, ensuring that each is well reasoned and supports the thesis.

- Editing: Revise at the sentence level for style and brevity. Revise for correctness: grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.

STAGE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE TASK

Papers in the Academic Disciplines

Although most of your experience with academic papers in high school may have been in English classes, you should be prepared for instructors in other academic disciplines to assign papers with significant research components. Here is a sampling of topics that have been assigned recently in a broad range of undergraduate courses:

Art History: Discuss the main differences between Romanesque and Gothic sculpture, using the sculptures of Jeremiah (St. Pierre Cathedral) and St. Théodore (Chartres Cathedral) as major examples.

Physics: Research and write a paper on solar cell technology, covering the following areas: basic physical theory, history and development, structure and materials, types and characteristics, practical uses, state of the art, and future prospects.

Political Science: Explain the contours of California’s referendum process in recent years and then, by focusing on one specific controversial referendum, explain and analyze the origins of this proposed measure, the campaign for and against it, its fate at the polls, and the political effects and legacy of this measure (whether it passed or failed).

Religious Studies: Select a particular religious group or movement present in the nation for at least twenty years and show how its belief or practice has changed since members of the group have been in America or, if the group began in America, since its first generation.

Some of these assignments allow students a considerable range of choice (within the general subject); others are highly specific in requiring students to address a particular issue. Most call for some library or online research; a few call for a combination of online library, and field research; others may be based entirely on field research. As with all academic writing, your first task is to make sure you understand the assignment. Remember to critically read and analyze the specific task(s) required of you in a paper assignment. One useful technique for doing this is to locate the assignment’s key verb(s), which will stipulate exactly what is expected of you.

Exercise 6.1

Analyze an Assignment

Reread the instructions for a recent assignment from another course.

1. Identify the key verb(s).
2. List the type of print, interview, or graphical data you were to gather to complete the assignment.
3. Reflect on your own experience to find some anecdote that might be appropriately included in a paper (or, absent that, a related experience that would provide a personal motivation for writing the paper).

STAGE 2: GATHERING DATA

When you begin a writing assignment, consider three questions:

1. What is the assignment?
2. What do I know about the subject?¹
3. What do I need to know in order to begin writing?

These questions prompt you to reflect on the assignment and define what is expected. Taking stock of class notes, readings, and whatever resources are available, you survey what you already know. Having identified the gaps between what you know and what you need to know in order to write, you can begin to gather data—most likely in stages. You may gather enough, at first, to formulate initial ideas. You may begin to write, see new gaps, and realize you need more data.

Types of Data

Data is a term used most often to refer to quantitative information such as the frequencies or percentages of natural phenomena in the sciences (e.g., the rate at which glaciers melt) or of social phenomena in the social sciences (e.g., the average age of Americans when they first marry). But not all data

¹Note: The terms subject and topic are often used interchangeably. In this chapter, we use subject to mean a broad area of interest that, once narrowed to a topic, becomes the focus of a paper. Within a thesis (the major organizing sentence of the paper), we speak of topic, not subject.
Now turn to your work for Exercise B, for which you wrote (most likely) on a new topic. Where did thinking occur here? As you wrote? Moments prior to your writing, as you selected the topic and focused your ideas?

Last, consider Exercise C. Where did your thinking take place? How did revision change your first-draft notes? What makes your second draft a better study guide than your first draft?

Finally, consider the differences in the relationship between writing and thinking across Exercises A, B, and C as you wrote on a topic you’d previously thought (but not written) about, on a new topic, and on a topic you’ve written about and are revising. Note the changing relationship between writing and thinking. Note especially how rewriting is related to restructuring.

In completing and reflecting on these exercises, you have glimpsed something of the marvelous complexity of writing. The job of this chapter is to help you develop some familiarity and comfort with this mysterious but crucial process.

### STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

By breaking the process into stages, writers turn the sometimes overwhelming task of writing a paper into manageable chunks, each requiring different activities that, collectively, build to a final draft. Generally, the stages involve understanding the task, gathering data, invention, drafting, revision, and editing.

Broadly speaking, the six stages of the writing process occur in the order we’ve listed. But writing is recursive; the process tends to loop back on itself. You generally move forward as you write, toward a finished product. But moving forward is seldom a straight-line process.

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**The Writing Process**

- **Understanding the task:** Read—or create—the assignment. Understand its purpose, scope, and audience.
- **Gathering data:** Locate and review information—from sources and from your own experience—and formulate an approach.
- **Invention:** Use various techniques (e.g., listing, outlining, freewriting) to generate promising ideas and a particular approach to the assignment. Gather more data if needed. Aim for a working thesis, a tentative (but well-reasoned and well-informed) statement of the direction you intend to pursue.
- **Drafting:** Sketch the paper you intend to compose and then write all sections necessary to support the working thesis. Stop if necessary to gather more data. Typically, you will both follow your plan and
Writing as a Process

WRITING AS THINKING

Most of us regard writing as an activity that culminates in a finished product: a paper, an application letter, study notes, and the like. We focus on the result rather than on the process of getting there. But how do we produce that paper or letter? Does the thought you write down not exist until it appears on the page? Does thought precede writing? If so, is writing merely a translation of prior thought? The relationship between thinking and writing is complex and not entirely understood. But it is worth reflecting on, especially as you embark on your writing-intensive career as a college student. Every time you pick up a pen or sit down at a computer to write, you engage in a thinking process—and what and how and when you think both affects and is affected by your writing in a variety of ways. Consider the possibilities as you complete the following brief exercises:

A: You find yourself enrolled in a composition class at a particular school. Why are you attending this school and not another? Write for five minutes on this question.

B: What single moment in your freshman experience thus far has been most (a) humorous, (b) promising, (c) vexing, (d) exasperating? Choose one and write for five minutes on this topic.

C: Select one page of notes from the presumably many you have taken in any of your classes. Reread the page and rewrite it, converting your first-pass notes into a well-organized study guide that would help you prepare for an exam. Devote five minutes to the effort.

Reflect on these exercises. Specifically, locate in your response to each one the point at which you believe your thinking took place. (Admittedly this may be difficult, but give it a try.) Before completing Exercise A, you probably gave considerable thought to where you are or would like to be attending college. Examine your writing and reflect on your thinking: Were you in any way rethinking your choice of school as you wrote? Or were you explaining a decision you've already made—that is, reporting on prior thinking? Perhaps some combination of these?