Chapter Seven

WRITING TO EXPLAIN AND REPORT

> Above all else, I want to write so clearly and accurately that others see things exactly the way I do.
>
> —Terry

Explaining is the task of working writers everywhere. To explain is to make some concept, event, or process clear to your reader, to *expose* or reveal it. (Another name for explanatory writing is expository writing.) In college, you may be asked to explain chemical processes by writing a laboratory report, literary events by writing a book report, political, sociological, or historical events in papers for those disciplines.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of much—but certainly not all—explanatory writing is objectivity. While it's virtually impossible for writers to achieve complete objectivity—to separate themselves from the ways they've learned to see the world—in explanatory writing, it's useful to try. Most of the time, to explain clearly requires writers to put themselves, along with their biases, in the background and their subject in the foreground, so that readers may see and understand it, as much as possible, for what it is.

Explanatory writing is defined not so much by its subject (which can be almost anything) as by the way the subject is treated. When you write to explain, you are answering one or more of these questions:

What is it? (define)
What happened?
What does it look like? (describe)
Where is it?

How is it related to other things? (compare/contrast)
How does it work?
Why did it happen? (analyze)
How is it held together? (synthesize)

In college classes, explanation often takes the form of research essays and reports that inform rather than remember, reflect, argue, or interpret. The assignment may ask you to describe how something works or to explain the causes and effects of a particular phenomenon. To explain anything successfully, you need a limited and defined topic, a clear sense of who you are writing to, information about your topic that goes beyond common knowledge, and organized explanatory strategies. And you need to focus on the thing being explained rather than on your feelings and opinions about it.

When I teach first-year writing classes, I commonly ask students to join together in small groups to investigate a local issue and, together, write a report to the rest of us explaining its significance. In the following example, a group of six students wrote a collaborative paper investigating the water-treatment plant in the city of Burlington, Vermont. Here, they explain the nature of the pollution that periodically closes the beaches on Lake Champlain:

> The sewage overflow usually takes place after heavy rains. The sewage and storm waters are handled by the same pipe, and the pipe can't handle both the sewage and the rain water. Then the overflow goes to the lake instead of the treatment plant. The real bummer is that the beaches are closed two to three days after.

This example is simple, clear, quite general, and effective for its intended audience. (By the way, the colloquial term *bummer* in the last line is a good indicator of the audience for whom the group is writing—other college students.)

Later in the same essay, the water-treatment group provides a more detailed explanation of the lake pollution:

> Vermont has always been a casual, back to nature, "no worries" state. During the last few years the Burlington Sewage Treatment Plant has had problems containing large quantities of effluent that are deposited during and after a rain storm. Its effluent is rich in nitrates, phosphorus and bacteria and the introduction of unnatural levels of substances by the sewage plant is one of the lake's major sources of pollution (Miller 130).

Here, they start off casually, calling Vermont a "no worries state," but quickly get down to business, buttressing their own explanation with a reference (Miller 130) in case the reader wants to check sources. Notice that in both of these examples the writers mix informal with formal language to explain most clearly. In fact, the very best explanations usually use the writer's simplest, most direct, comfortable language. Notice, too, how explaining relies on defining and describing to achieve clarity.

When you write to explain, keep these three guidelines in mind: First, explanatory writing emphasizes the thing explained rather than the writer's beliefs and feelings. Second, explanatory writing focuses on the reader's need for information rather than the writer's desire for self-expression. Third, explanatory writing has a stated thesis, clear explanatory strategies, and a logical organizational structure.

To explain material delivered in lectures or found in textbooks, it's a good idea to do so in your own words—which shows you have digested and understood the ideas—but also to quote selectively from your sources for further support. In any case, when explaining material for specific courses, be sure to use the language and conventions of the discipline to which the course belongs.

Let's look more closely at the basic strategies of explanatory (expository) discourse, including the operations of *defining, describing, comparing/contrasting, analyzing,* and *synthesizing,* as well as the basic formats of *reports, summaries,* and *abstracts.*

DEFINING

> **to define:** v. to state the precise meaning of something; to describe the nature or basic qualities of; to specify distinctly; to serve to distinguish.

Defining is simply a more specialized mode of explaining, in which you must be especially precise because defining something means separating it from other similar concepts.

You will seldom be asked to write a whole paper defining something. More commonly, you will be expected to act on your definition. For example, in math you may have to define differential equations and be able to solve problems based on your definition; in psychology you may need to define Freud's theories and apply your definition to a case study; in business you may need to define a cost/benefit equation and make a case for this practice.

At one point in the water-treatment essay, the writers provide us with a technical definition of pollution that is both more inclusive and more precise than their description of Lake Champlain pollution so far:

> In order to talk about pollution, one must define the terms involved. According to the dictionary "to pollute," means, "to defile, to soil, or to make unclean." This definition is a bit too general for our needs so we incorporate another: "Pollution is the introduction of material or effects at a harmful level" (C. R. Curds and H. A. Hawkes 20).

The two external sources are pretty basic—a dictionary and a text on the subject of pollution (Curds and Hawkes' *Ecological Aspects of Used Water Treatment,* 1975); however, they get the job done. When writing, in the academic world and elsewhere, make your definitions clear and authoritative.

Sometimes it will be necessary to do your own defining, as in the following case, where Susan defines the various strands of contemporary music in order to classify and compare them:

> "Rock Classics" can be loud, raucous, and even noisy at times, but then the band will slow down with gentle ballads. The bands which play this type of music include the following: Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Jethro Tull, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, Neil Young, and even the Beatles.

Susan then provides a definition of several more categories: Heavy Metal, Glitter Rock, and One Hit Wonders. Here, for example, is her definition of Glitter Rock:

> This style of music is very extravagant, peculiar, and bizarre. It is hard to describe, being sometimes screechy, other times quiet. This type of music got its start in the early seventies with performers such as David Bowie, Alice Cooper, Lou Reed, and Frank Zappa.

Susan's task is a difficult one, since music—especially contemporary music—is forever changing and does not succumb easily to definition. However, notice that she uses examples of well-known rock performers to help her clarify what she means. The use of examples typically clarifies and strengthens definitions.

When writing essays that depend heavily on defining something, keep the following principles in mind: (1) in defining a word, use synonyms and not the word itself to make your definition clear (for example, "Fish are cold-blooded animals living in water and having backbones, gills, and fins."); (2) illustrate with concrete examples (as Susan did above or as we could do about fish by describing several different species of them); (3) go back to the basics; don't assume your reader knows even the

simplest terms; don't be afraid to state what to you is obvious (that, for example, all fish "live in water"); (4) sometimes it's helpful to point out what your definition does not include (the term *fish,* for example, does not normally include whales, lobsters, or scallops).

DESCRIBING

> **to describe:** v. to give a verbal account; to transmit a mental image or impression with words.

To describe a person, place, or thing is to create a verbal image so that readers can see what you see, hear what you hear, and taste, smell, and feel what you taste, smell, and feel. Your goal is to make it real enough for readers to experience it for themselves. Above all, descriptive details need to be purposeful. Heed the advice of Russian writer Anton Chekhov: "If a gun is hanging on the wall in the first chapter, it must, without fail, fire in the second or third chapter. If it doesn't fire, it mustn't hang either."

The ability to describe something that you witnessed or experienced so that your reader can witness or experience it is useful in all kinds of writing from expository to argumentative, narrative to interpretative. In the following example, Becky describes the setting of a ballet rehearsal, explaining at the same time, the difference between amateur and professional dancers:

> The backstage studio is alive with energy. . . . Dancers are scattered around the room, stretching, chatting, adjusting shoes and tights. Company members, the professionals who are joining us for this performance, wear tattered leg warmers, sweatpants which have lost their elastic, and old T-shirts over tights and leotards. Their hair is knotted into buns or, in the case of male dancers, held tight with sweatbands. You can tell the students by the runless pink tights, dress-code leotards, and immaculate hair.

To describe how processes work is more complicated than giving a simple physical description, for in addition to showing objects at rest, you need to show them in sequence and motion. To describe a process, it's usually best to divide the process into discrete steps and present the steps in a logical order. For some processes this is easy (making chili, giving highway directions). For others it is more difficult, either because many steps are all happening at once or because people really don't know which steps necessarily come before others (manufacturing a car, writing a research paper).

Whatever the case, your job is to show the steps in a logical

sequence that will be easy for readers to understand. To orient readers, you may also want to number the steps, using transition words such as *first, second,* and *third.* In the following example, a team of students visited Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream company to write a paper explaining its origin and operation; they included the following process description in their paper:

> We learned that their ice cream begins in the Blend Tank, a two hundred forty lb. stainless steel tank that combines Vermont milk, sweet cream, egg yolks, unrefined sugar, and the flavor of the day.
>
> From there, the mix is sent in big stainless vats to the thirty-six degree (cold!) Tank Room, where it sits for four to eight hours before it receives further flavoring.
>
> From the Tank Room, the mix moves into four, three hundred gallon Flavor Vats, so they can put in the greenish liquid peppermint extract for the Mint Oreo and the brown pungent smelling coffee extract for the Coffee Heath Bar Crunch.
>
> Finally, it moves to the Flavor Vat, where they mix in big chunks of broken Oreos or Heath Bar they need for the ice cream they are producing on that day.

The ice cream making process is clear because the writers use a four-part sequence with the cue words, *begins, from there, from the,* and *finally,* so there is no question of what is happening when.

To describe well, use nouns that conjure up concrete and specific images, such as the *stainless steel vats* and *Heath Bars* in the Ben and Jerry's piece. Also use action verbs wherever you can, such as *scattered* and *knotted* in the ballet paper. And use modifiers that appeal to the senses—*tattered leg warmers, greenish liquid peppermint extract*—all of which help readers visualize what you are talking about.

COMPARING OR CONTRASTING

> **to compare:** v. to examine (two or more things, ideas, people, etc.) for the purpose of noting similarities and differences; to consider or describe as similar.

We compare things all the time: this college, city, or state to that; one movie, book, or CD to another; and so on. As we compare, we usually also contrast, noting the differences as well as the similarities in our comparison; thus, the act of comparing includes the act of contrasting as well. In my nonacademic life, I read the magazine *Consumer Reports* regularly

to help me choose one product over another; in my academic life, I read *College English* to help me choose one theory or interpretation over another.

Throughout your college studies you will be asked to compare and contrast in order to interpret and evaluate; you will do this as often in business, math, and engineering as in history, philosophy, and literature. However, actual comparative essays are more common in the latter, more interpretive disciplines than in the former, more quantitative ones. For purposes of essay writing, you should be aware of particular *types* of comparison as well as good *methods* for doing it.

Apples and Apples

At a basic level, we compare like things to like things: one apple to another for taste, color, size, etc. We usually compare similar kinds of things to answer questions of worth or suitability: is this the best pen (of several kinds) to write with? Is this the best stereo system (of several brands) for me to buy? Is this the best interpretation (among competing ones) of this poem? In these instances, the elements being compared are similar and do similar things, and thus can be compared point by point.

Apples and Oranges

Most often people use these terms—apples and oranges—to describe a false comparison: you can't ask which fruit tastes better because the two are different. You might prefer an apple to an orange, but it makes no sense to say that one is better than the other.

Analogy

Writers deliberately compare one concept or item to another to make clearer an aspect of one: learning to write may be compared to learning to ride a bike—an analogy that stresses the part of writing that is difficult to teach but, once learned, is difficult to forget. In like manner, it is hard to explain how the human mind works, but making an analogy to the electronic on/off switches of a computer circuit board may help explain it—at least to some people. Writers use analogies to make clear that which is not.

Figurative Language

You are probably familiar with figurative language such as metaphor, simile, and personification from discussions of poetry, fiction, or drama, but here, notice the powerful effect they have on writing that is not fiction,

that attempts to show the world as the writer actually sees it, that makes comparisons stick in the mind of the reader. Writers use *metaphor* to compare something abstract to something concrete or something unknown to something known. For example, in the previous chapter Annie Dillard describes a weasel as "a muscled ribbon." Writers achieve similarly vivid results when they use *similes*—a type of metaphor that states the comparison directly by using the words *like* or *as*. Here, for example, is Dillard's whole sentence about the weasel:

> He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert.

To make you see this weasel in no uncertain terms—as she saw it—she includes in her definition several literal descriptions ("ten inches," "soft-furred," "alert"), one metaphor ("a muscled ribbon"), and two similes ("thin as a curve," "brown as fruitwood").

Personification is the metaphorical comparison of inanimate to animate objects—especially to human beings. Notice in the following passage from *The Immense Journey** how Loren Eiseley uses this technique to make us see a landscape as he saw it:

> Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features of profane old age.

In this passage, some land is said to "smile," a comparison to a happy human state, and some land is "convulsed like the features of profane old age," a sad human state.

ANALYZING

> **to analyze:** v. to separate into parts or basic principles in order to determine the nature of the whole; examine methodically.

All academic disciplines teach analysis in one form or another. When you analyze something, you must find a logic that holds it together and use that logic to take it apart. Essentially, analysis requires that you identify what parts make up a whole and that you then look closely at what parts make up each part. Depending on your discipline, of course, you may be asked to analyze a story, an argument, a social group, the circulation system, or the universe. All require a similar mental operation.

A simple example of an analytic task could be found in something

*(New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1957)

as common as a table. Depending on your purpose, a table might be analyzed according to structure (legs, braces, top); type (drop leaf, trestle, end); shape (round, oval, square); purpose (dining, coffee, work); or materials (wood, metal, plastic). Each component can be broken down further: the category of wood into oak, cherry, pine, walnut, etc.

For an example of analysis, look again at the water-treatment essay composed for my writing class. The group handed out a survey to citizens of Burlington to find out how much they knew about pollution on Lake Champlain. In order to report the results, they had to collect, tabulate, and make sense of the responses. Here is how they reported the results of their analysis:

> Eighty-five percent of the people realized there is a serious sewage problem in Burlington. Sixty-five percent realized Burlington's drinking water comes from Lake Champlain. Seventy percent knew that the beaches closed because of the sewage problem. Forty percent blamed the sewage problem on the city, forty percent blamed it on the treatment plant, ten percent did not think there was a problem, and ten percent did not answer. Only thirty percent of the people bought water because of the problem. . . . A surprising sixty-five percent said it is worth the estimated fifty-two million dollars to fix the problem.
>
> This survey further proves that most of the people in Burlington are aware of the serious nature of the sewage problem in Lake Champlain. However, they were not fully aware of the toxic materials being dumped in the water.

Notice that the analysis here depends upon a simple methodical tabulation of quantifiable survey answers and the consequent drawing of conclusions based on the counting.

SYNTHESIZING

> **to synthesize:** v. to combine parts to form a new whole; arranging and combining elements or pieces to make a pattern or structure not there before.

The most sophisticated way to report or explain is to synthesize. All academic disciplines teach synthesis. To perform this operation, you put ideas or elements or parts together—sometimes things that don't seem to belong together—to form a new whole. Synthesizing may involve different operations, depending on the discipline, but in all it means putting elements together to form new wholes. In chemistry, when you

combine chemicals, you produce a chemical synthesis—a new *synthetic* material may result. In history, a synthesis may involve combining one historian's theory of historical development with that of another, and so on.

The ability to synthesize is prized in both the academic and the nonacademic world, because it implies that you know not only how to take things apart but also how to put them back together, which is the work of builders, engineers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, artists, literary critics, and teachers, among others. It might be argued, however, that the ability to synthesize is a survival skill necessary to all of us in an increasingly complex world.

An example from my discipline would be the following question, commonly asked in essay examinations: "You have read three different American writers—Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Identify and explain one theme common to all three." You may need to begin by *analyzing* each work, making notes or an outline of the major points in Emerson's essays, Thoreau's *Walden,* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass.* You find that Emerson looked to the natural world for ethical lessons, that Thoreau made a spiritual symbol of Walden Pond, and that Whitman revered the smallest as well as the greatest creature in the universe. You've now got evidence for the theme of *respect for nature* that connects all three.

In the following student example, notice how the writers of the waste-treatment essay referred to in this chapter arrive at a synthesis at the end of their paper by making recommendations based on their research discoveries:

> The first and most important thing to do is reduce the amount of your buying. If you don't absolutely need the product then don't buy it. You don't need a chemistry degree from U.V.M. to reduce hazardous chemicals in your home. You can do the following:
>
> 1) When you're buying a product make sure that if it's hazardous there are directions on how to dispose of it. If you buy something you're responsible for disposing of it.
>
> 2) Don't buy it unless you really need it.
>
> 3) Don't buy more than you need. Getting rid of the extra can be annoying.
>
> 4) Use the safest and simplest substances that you can find.
>
> 5) Recycle whatever you can: Used motor oil, paint thinners, battery acid (and batteries), automatic transmission fluid, diesel fluid, fuel oil, gasoline, kerosene, motor oil, and even dry cleaning solvents can be refined and used again just like aluminum cans. (See Appendix C.) If you're

> not sure what to do see the "Household Hazardous Waste Chart." It was adapted from the Water Pollution Control Federation pamphlet, 1987.

In this case the synthesis becomes, in the end, an argument for water conservation. Finally, the writers also attempt to persuade their readers to act as a result of reading this essay.

As you have probably figured out by now, people don't set out to write pieces called synthesis essays. Most often they have been explaining or analyzing something and find the need to make suggestions or draw inferences based on that work.

REPORTING

> **to report:** v. to relate or tell about; to provide an account for publication or broadcast; to submit results for consideration.

A report describes an event or tells a story about something. You may have written a book report (a description of what the book is about) or a laboratory report (the story of what happened during an experiment). If you are assigned to write reports in a particular class, your instructor will specify what kind of report and give you guidelines for what it should look like.

Reports require information to be conveyed to an audience clearly, directly, and succinctly: a progress report on a project or research paper, a report on a lecture or film that you attended, or a report on available resources to proceed with a project. You may often relate such information in any order that makes sense to you (and, you hope, to your audience). However, in some disciplines the forms for reporting information may be highly specific, as in the sciences and social sciences, where reports generally follow a predictable form.

Reporting News and Events

Journalists train themselves to explain events by asking what we might call "reporter's questions": Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? The advantage of remembering a set of routine questions is obvious: writing reports for daily papers requires fast writing with little time for revision. Reporters actually call these reports "stories" and commonly write them in one draft, composing in their heads while driving back from the scene of the accident, fire, speech, or whatever they have been assigned to write about that day. (At least one reporter has told me that he sometimes begins composing the story on the way *to* the event.)

For rapid composing, nothing beats a set of second-nature questions that help sort out new information by putting it into preset categories:

Who is this story about? What is the issue here? Where did it occur? When—what time of day? Why did it happen—what caused the situation to develop as it did? And how did it happen—how did the events unfold? These questions are variations of those a lab scientist or a novelist might ask, as they attempt to provide a framework for talking about the world and what happens in it—be that piece of the world one's laboratory, one's news beat, or one's *Oz* or *Wonderland.*

On those occasions when you are asked to report something that happened in a meeting, concert, or public event, using the journalists' questions will quickly organize your information.

Reporting Research

I found the following format recommended in both biology and psychology for reporting the results of experiments; forms similar to it will be used in other social science and hard science areas as well:

1. Title: a literal description of the topic of your report.
2. Abstract: a summary in two hundred fifty words or fewer of the why, how, and what of your report.
3. Introduction: a statement of your hypothesis and a review of the relevant literature.
4. Methods and materials: information about how you set up your experiment that would allow another experimenter to replicate your work.
5. Results: charts, tables, and figures accompanied by a prose narrative to explain what happened.
6. Discussion: a review of your results, a comparison to other studies, and a discussion of implications.
7. References: a list of all sources actually cited in your report, using appropriate documentation format (see Chapters Eleven and Twelve).
8. Appendices: work pertinent to your report, but not essential to understanding it.

In the event that you are asked to write a technical report, I would consult one of the many report-writing handbooks used in technical writing or business writing courses.

SUMMARIZING

A summary reduces a long text to a shorter one by condensing the main ideas and skipping the details. For example, an *executive summary* may

be a one- or two-page document that condenses a much longer report into a form readable in a few minutes. The following are a few guidelines for writing summaries.

1. Keep your primary objective in mind: to reproduce faithfully the main ideas of a longer document, skipping the details.
2. Be accurate and brief: Condense paragraphs to sentences, sentences to phrases, and skip sections that you judge redundant or unnecessary. (Don't, however, reduce the piece to an outline that only you can understand.)
3. Write in your own clearest style. A summary is about information: It is more important to be clear than to be true to the style of the original document.
4. Follow the organizational pattern of the original: If the original has subheadings or numbered points, use them as guides for writing your condensation.
5. Maintain the tone of the original as best you can. If the source is witty, be witty; if the source is formal, be formal.

Abstracting

An abstract is a condensed summary. Like a summary, an abstract reduces a text to an outline of its most important points. But, whereas a summary of an article's essential points may be several pages long, an abstract will be less than a page, more likely one paragraph. Here, for example, is an abstract of the advice for writing summaries (above):

> To write a summary, 1) keep your objective in mind, 2) be accurate and brief, 3) use a clear style, 4) use the organizational pattern and 5) tone of the original document.

Abstracts may be routine, but they're not easy to write. They are difficult because you must *thoroughly* understand the piece you are abstracting and because you have so little freedom to use your own language. To write them, follow the general advice for writing summaries, only more rigorously. Of course, the one necessary preparation for writing abstracts is to be thoroughly familiar with the piece you are abstracting. You might consider writing a paragraph-by-paragraph topical outline first, including just the topic sentence of each paragraph. Then see if you can cluster these under more condensed headings, and so on. (It helps if the piece itself follows a predictable pattern, including thesis statement, topic sentences and the like.)

A REFLECTION ON THE NECESSITY OF THESIS STATEMENTS

An informational or argumentative thesis states the theme or central idea of your paper, usually in the first paragraph or page, alerting the reader to both the subject of your paper and what you intend to say about that subject. In explanatory and informational papers, a thesis stated early makes good sense because it tells the reader the nature of the explanation to follow. In this chapter the subject is defined and explained in the first paragraph.

In argumentative and interpretative papers, a good thesis statement asserts the writer's position, telling readers that what follows will support that position. In fact, a good thesis helps the writer as well as the reader by articulating a clear position to defend. For example, consider these three possible theses meant to explain a history paper:

1. The Battle of Gettysburg was one of the most interesting battles of the Civil War.
2. Geography played an important role in the Battle of Gettysburg.
3. The North got to the high ground first, and the North won the Battle of Gettysburg.

In my judgment, the first sentence is a weak thesis. To call something "interesting" may be polite, but is not in itself interesting. The second sentence, however, announces one of the specifically interesting aspects of the battle, geography, and so invites the reader to learn more about that. It makes a decent, though unexciting, thesis. The third sentence appeals to me even more. This writer suggests that he or she knows exactly where the essay is going right from the start and promises to do so in a lively prose style.

Sometimes, however, writers of argumentative papers deliberately delay revealing their thesis—their own position on an issue—until they have laid out both sides for the reader to ponder. I will say more about this *delayed thesis* in the next chapter, but again the business of stating a thesis is a matter of writer judgment, depending on what effect he or she wants to create.

In narrative and reflective essays, such as discussed in the last chapter, an *embedded thesis* often emerges by the end of the essay, but is never actually stated in so many words. Often in such papers the writer's intention is speculative or exploratory, so that providing a clear statement of purpose actually works against the writer's intention.

Finally, keep in mind that most college instructors expect to find thesis statements in the papers they assign, so check the stated expectations of assignments carefully. If you choose to ignore this expectation, it's

a good idea to make sure your central point emerges in some other unmistakable manner.

SUGGESTIONS FOR JOURNAL WRITING

1. What kinds of explanatory papers do you most commonly write now? What kinds have you written in the past? In your own words, explain the procedure for writing one of these forms.
2. Composition books such as this may be considered examples of explanatory writing, trying to give certain advice to writers on all the necessary points of writing the author can think of. Examine this book by comparing it to other composition books you have had in the past. What about it strikes you as different? What's the same?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ESSAY WRITING

1. Select a paper you have already written for this or another course and write a summary or an abstract of it. Exchange with another student and help make each other's papers even tighter, shorter, and more precise. Conclude with a note about the difficulty of doing this type of writing.
2. Write a book report of this or another book you are currently using for this course. As a class, compare your results with the brief suggestions you find in this book. Would you modify or expand any of them? Would you add any new ones?

COLLABORATIVE

This can be done with any size group—the more the merrier. Agree on a local institution (pizza parlor, drug store, student center, library—the smaller the better). Each of you write individually about this place, focusing on something small and concrete (conversations overheard in a booth, action at the checkout counter, etc.); share your drafts, noting the different approaches each reporter took; finally, select editors and bind the results together as a class book to share with those who own or work in this place (see *Postscript Three*).