
Illustrating Ideas by Use of Example

The use of examples to illustrate an idea under discussion is the most common, and frequently the most efficient, pattern of exposition. It is a method we use almost instinctively; for instance, instead of talking in generalities about the qualities of a good city manager, we cite Angela Lopes as an example. We may go further and illustrate her virtues as a manager by a specific account of her handling a crucial situation during the last power shortage or hurricane. In this way, we put our abstract ideas into concrete form—making them clearer and more convincing. As readers, we look for examples as well, often responding to general statements with a silently voiced question, “For instance?” and expecting the writer to provide us with appropriate specifics.

Examples can be short or long: a brief illustration within a sentence or a fully developed instance filling a paragraph or more. They can appear singly, or they can work together in clusters, as in the following paragraph where brief examples serve to make a generalization vivid and convincing.

There were many superstitions regarding food. Dropping a fork meant that company would be coming. If we were to take a second helping of potatoes while we still had some left on our plate, someone always predicted that a person more hungry than we were would drop in during the day. Every housewife believed that food from a tin can had to be removed immediately after opening, or it would become deadly poison within a few seconds. My mother always ran across the room to dump the contents immediately.

—Lewis Hill, “Black Cats and Horse Hairs”

Generality

Example 1

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

Whether making an explanation clear, a generality more convincing, or an argument more persuasive, examples work in the same way. They make the general more specific, the abstract more concrete, and in so doing they illustrate a sound principle of writing.

WHY USE EXAMPLES?

Examples clarify by showing readers what a general statement means in terms of individual events, people, or ideas. By pointing out students who use “lucky” pens to take a test, lawyers who wear “special” ties or shoes to a big day in court, and engineers who begin a new project with a special breakfast, a writer can aid understanding of the statement, “Even educated people often make superstition part of their everyday lives.”

On the other hand, lack of clear illustrations may leave readers with only a hazy conception of the points the writer has tried to make. Even worse, readers may try to supply examples from their own knowledge or experience, leading them to an impression different from that intended by the author. Since writers are the ones trying to communicate, clarity is primarily their responsibility.

Not only do good examples put into clear form what otherwise might remain vague and abstract, but they also serve to make generalizations and conclusions convincing. Not every generality requires supporting examples, of course. An audience with even a passing familiarity with films probably does not need extended examples to understand and accept the statement, "Action films are characterized by physical violence, explosions, chase scenes, and broadly drawn characters." Conclusions about unfamiliar or complicated subjects, technical discussions, and perspectives that may be difficult for readers to share initially usually call for examples. College instructors, for instance, will usually look for examples to render an interpretation convincing; business and public audiences will search reports and memorandums for examples that make the writer's judgments plausible.

With something specific for readers to visualize, a statement becomes more convincing—but convincing within certain limitations. If you use the Volvo as an example of Swedish manufacturing, the reader is probably aware that this car may not be entirely typical. For ordinary purposes of explanation, the Volvo example could make its point convincingly enough. In supporting an argument, however, you need either to choose an example that is clearly typical or to present several examples to show that you have represented the situation fairly.

CHOOSING A STRATEGY

As a writer, you need to recognize not only places where individual examples can aid your writing but also occasions when your ideas might be most effectively presented through the use of examples as the primary strategy for an essay. If you have a fresh, unusual, or surprising conclusion to offer readers, consider using examples in a thesis-and-support strategy. Announce your thesis (perspective, interpretation) to readers, then offer evidence of its reasonableness in the form of varied, carefully developed examples, as illustrated in the following plan for an essay.

Tentative Thesis Modern technology offers many new creative outlets for writers, musicians, and artists.

Supporting Point Cable television has multiplied the opportunities for creative work by increasing greatly the number of television programs.

Example: It provides more work for scriptwriters of all kinds: dramatic, documentary, news, sports, and comedy.

Example: It creates more opportunities for actors, cinematographers, and directors.

Example: It produces more programs calling for original music, art, and graphics.

Supporting POINT Software development calls for creative artists as WELL AS SOFTWARE ENGINEERS.

Example: Games require scriptwriters, artistic designers, graphic artists, and composers (for music to accompany the action).

Example: Office programs require graphic design; home and landscape design programs involve artistic and graphic design; educational software calls for writers and designers (sometimes even music).

Supporting Point Personal computers and the Internet provide the means to create and distribute works of art without significant financial resources.

Example: Composers and performers can create musical works without hiring performers or renting a studio and distribute their work on the World Wide Web.

Example: Desktop publishing allows writers to create printed copies of their novels, essays, and other writing without the expense or difficulty of working with publishers and printers.

Example: Design programs and drawing/painting programs let visual artists create without having to maintain a studio or buy expensive materials, and the World Wide Web gives them a way to advertise and distribute their work.

If an extended, especially detailed example covers all aspects of your topic that need explaining or provides a particularly appropriate instance of your main idea, consider using a representative example strategy. A representative example needs to be interesting in itself because it will serve as the main focus of the writing, preceded or followed (or both) by the main idea it illustrates.

In this chapter, Andy Rooney's "In and of Ourselves We Trust" (pp. 55–56) provides a particularly successful instance of a representative example (stopping at a red light when no one is around) followed by the writer's conclusion that "the whole structure of our society depends on mutual trust, not distrust."

CHOOSING EXAMPLES

Successful writers select and use example cautiously, keeping in mind their readers and their own specific purposes for communicating. To be effective, an example must be pertinent to the chief qualities of the generality it illustrates. In writing about horror films, for instance, you might offer this interpretation: "The films generally have contemporary settings, yet most reinforce traditional, even old-fashioned, roles for both men and women." To be pertinent, examples would need to address the various elements of this thesis, including the contrast between the contemporary setting and the old-fashioned values, the roles of both men and women, and exceptions to the conclusion (the interpretation applies to "most" horror films, but not all).

Examples should be representative as well, presenting in a fair manner the range of situations, people, or ideas to which a generality applies. In discussing a new approach to education, you should be ready to consider it in terms of urban and rural as well as suburban communities. Your interpretation of a play, film, novel, or recording should take into account the work as a whole, not simply those parts corresponding most directly to your thesis. If you wish readers to adopt your perspective, you should choose examples that represent any important differences among their outlooks, often the product of differences in background, gender, ethnicity, or education.

It is possible to provide too many examples and make them too long, but for most writers, the opposite is usually the problem. We frequently underestimate the number of examples needed because we pay attention only to those that come to mind most readily. Almost any part of a subject can provide potential examples, however. With your generality or thesis in mind, look for representative events, situations, quotations, or people; typical attitudes, opinions, or ideas; and characteristic physical and emotional details. Make a conscious effort to draw examples from a variety of sources.

- **Your Experiences:** Draw on your involvement with the topic. For an essay on work, draw on jobs you have held. For an essay on sports, think of your experiences (pleasant and unpleasant) as an athlete or spectator. For a report on health care, begin with your own broken bones, doctor's appointments, sessions in the dentist's chair, and trips to the hospital either as patient or visitor.
- **Your Reading:** Add to your knowledge of a topic by searching a library catalog or using an Internet search engine. Choose articles and reports that expand your understanding and suggest the ways others may respond to your conclusions. Draw examples (including statistics) from your reading, being careful to acknowledge your sources.
- **Other People:** Think about other people whose experiences are consistent with your conclusions: the neighbor whose job history reflects a changing view of loyalty to an employer or your cousin whose reliance on the Internet for shopping illustrates changing patterns of consumption.
- **One from a Group:** When your thesis or generalization applies to a wide variety of people, situations, organizations, or experiences, you may be tempted to provide numerous examples as a way of representing the group as a whole but instead end up with a cluster of indistinct, ineffective illustrations. Instead, consider focusing on one or two members of the group and presenting them in extended detail that explains and supports your conclusions. To illustrate the features of science fiction movies, for example, turn to one or two films likely to be familiar to your readers.

There is no set length for effective examples. They can be as short as a few words or as long as several paragraphs in length, depending on the purpose they serve. For a thesis-and-support essay, however, a paragraph of four to six sentences provides a good measure.

Each paragraph supporting your main idea should provide several brief examples (as in the sample paragraph on p. 43) or several sentences presenting the example and discussing it in detail. Writers often overestimate how much their readers know about a subject and offer examples lacking in important ideas and information, as in the following student example from a paper for a course on public health policy.

Nonprescription drugs are still drugs and can be dangerous if misused. Many people make themselves ill by doubling or tripling the dosage of nonprescription drugs in order to get a greater effect.

When her instructor and fellow students pointed out the lack of information in this paragraph, the writer realized that she could have included examples of the toxic effects of high dosages of aspirin and other painkillers, of allergic reactions to excessive intake of vitamin and mineral supplements, and of physical damage that can result from overuse of digestive remedies—examples her readers would have found informative and useful.

Remember, a good example must be either instantly obvious to readers or fully developed so that they learn exactly what it illustrates, and how. Sometimes, however, illustration may be provided best by something other than a real-life example—a fictional anecdote, an analogy, or perhaps a parable that demonstrates the general idea. Here even greater care is needed to be sure these examples are both precise and clear.

Student Essay

If you looked back over the events in your life, how would you interpret them? Would you be able to state the perspective or idea that ties them together? The generality that runs through them? How would you select and present examples to illustrate the generality and help readers understand and share your perspective?

Adrian Boykin's experiences as a stutterer and his struggles to deal with the impediment shaped many of the events in his life, and he is able to share an understanding of his experiences and his perspective through carefully selected examples in the essay that follows.

Overcoming an Impediment: A Rite of Passage

Adrian Boykin

“SP, SP, SP, SP SPIT IT OUT ALREADY ADRIAN!” THESE WERE AMONG THE INSULTS I RECEIVED FROM CLASSMATES THROUGHOUT ELEMENTARY AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL. INHERITING THE STUTTERING, DOMINANTLY LINKED PHENOTYPE FROM MY FATHER'S SIDE OF MY FAMILY HAS AFFECTED MY SPEECH, AND IN TURN MY RELATIONSHIPS, SINCE I FIRST BEGAN TO SPEAK.

Starting when I was only eight years old and in the third grade, I took speech lessons at school in an attempt to overcome a speech impediment. The trait dates back to my great grandfather. In the last four generations, many Boykin men have expressed a stutter, while others, such as my younger brother, have not. Throughout childhood I often encountered a block in my speech at the first word of each sentence when beginning to speak. From third grade through my freshman year in high school, I participated in monthly, one-on-one speech classes. Through my working diligently with a speech specialist, I have, for the most part, been able to overcome this genetic defect successfully and speak without impediment.

As a stutterer, it is difficult to explain to a nonstutterer why we sometimes just can't get the words out. Speaking in a casual one-on-one situation has never been a problem for me. Only in stressful situations where a large group of people were gathered, or in a setting where everyone is attempting to speak, did my speech impediment become evident. At these times I would compare the first word of my sentence to ice cream that has been in the freezer for a month on the coldest setting. No matter how hard you try to get a full scoop out of the container, only small tastes of the ice cream will come out. Unfortunately, for the stutterer, that small, unfulfilling taste of ice cream is the first syllable of the stutterer's first word. Repeatedly.

The problems I encountered with speech never rivaled what my dad experienced growing up. Unable to answer the telephone, speak in class, or even speak without incessant stuttering at the dinner table, my father attended a summer camp in Michigan for three months each summer, four summers in a row, with the hopes of correcting his impediment. Today, though he still often stutters momentarily at the beginning of his sentences, he is a successful custom furniture designer and businessman. About ten years ago, still having difficulty speaking in front of groups, Dad completed the Toastmasters speaking course. Because his speech impediment hindered his social development for so many years and in so many ways, he was determined to never let my impediment hold me back socially.

Because children are often cruel, I was picked on many times by my peers in elementary and junior high school for stuttering. Friends often made fun of me by imitating the stutter I had at the beginning of my sentences. Furthermore, I grew up watching television shows such as In Living Color and movies such as Harlem Nights and Billy Madison, which depict people with speech impediments as being stupid outcasts or class clowns. Looking back at these television shows and movies, I sometimes ask myself why dehumanization of stutterers is tolerated by the public. Racist stabs at minorities are viewed as disgusting and intolerable by the masses, but attacks and mockery aimed at stutterers are seen as hilarious.

Fortunately, my speech impediment was never something that hindered me from experiencing all the things that other students with normal speech experienced. Because my father knew firsthand what it was like to have a speech impediment, he made sure that I was given therapy to correct my stutter. My father first sent me to a speech therapist affiliated with my elementary school in Denver. Only eight years old, I saw speech therapy as a fun way to get out of class and meet another boy, Michael, who also had a “block in his throat.” Attending therapy with another child helped me get away from the feeling that I was alone in my speech problem. During speech class, though, I really never concentrated on Michael. What I remember is my therapist, Mrs. Rainart. “Wow,” I always thought, “she is the nicest lady, and pretty too!” This was better than playing with G. I. Joes! By fifth grade, the main reason I liked going to therapy was because I liked seeing her.

Fifth grade was a time of physical change and of change in how I looked at the girls. Mrs. Rainart’s milky white teeth and spiral, burgundy-colored hair made speech therapy more than tolerable for me. You know how elementary school children all have a crush on a teacher at one time or another? I guess that teacher was Mrs. Rainart for me.

My mother got a job in Boulder with Celestial Seasonings Tea Company when I was eleven. As a result we moved to a house in a suburb called Broomfield, wherein my father promptly found me another speech therapist in Boulder. The change in scenery made me nervous. Entering Birch Elementary School, I had to make all new friends. Fortunately, everyone at Birch was really nice. My confidence was soaring, and I was convinced that I no longer needed to go to some stupid speech class.

Then came my worst-ever stuttering experience. For my seventh-grade birthday, my parents let me have a party for both my boyfriends and my girlfriends. The night started well, with my friends and I boogying down to the latest Michael Jackson album. I was wearing my nicest polyester shirt to go with my loafers and tight Wranglers. My parents interrupted our disco party for cake, ice cream, and presents.

With the speech impediment seemingly gone, I started socializing with the group while I was opening my gifts. My girlfriend, Emily, gave me the coolest Michael Jordan poster. I began to tell Emily how much I appreciated her gift, when out of nowhere, a heavy encompassing piece of cake got stuck in my throat, and I could only stutter to Emily. I ran to the sink to get water when I realized it wasn’t the cake that wasn’t letting me speak, but that frickin’ stutter. Trying to regain my composure, I went back into the family room and said to Emily, “Th, th, th, th.” Once more, I tried to thank Emily, “Th, th, th, th.”

Embarrassed, I could not speak, but only heard the laughter of ten wild seventh graders reverberating throughout the room. My good friend Shawn, always quick-witted, decided to slash open my wound a little further and promptly pour a tablespoon of salt on it. He said clearly and loudly, “Dang, Adrian speaks about as well as a cat barks.”

More than anything, my stuttering as a child pushed me to aspire to excel socially. Throughout high school, I struggled to become a class leader whom others admired as someone who would express the concerns and wants of the school and group.

At the end of my junior year, my speech impediment was rarely noticeable. Furthermore, I wanted to prove to myself that I could speak in the most pressure-packed situations without a problem. Thus, I decided to run for senior class vice president. I gave my election speech in front of my senior class of about 300 and Broomfield High School's faculty. Approaching the podium, I was nervous, but confident in my speech. Usually having difficulties with my first word, I concentrated on my therapy tactics. "Keep it slow in the first word," I reminded myself. "Breathe deeply and imagine being in a one-on-one conversation." The sweat flowing in large beads down my back, I delivered a strong, stutter-free, three-minute speech. The crowd could not concentrate on my impediment because there was none. My classmates were forced to concentrate on the content of my speech. The next day I was given word of my election as class vice president.

During my senior year I realized that I was no longer getting any comments about my speech. I also started using my techniques learned from seven years of speech therapy without thinking about them. I had not been in a dusty brown, eight-by-twelve cubicle for three years. Even better, there was no reason for me to ever foresee going back. My father and I sat down and discussed our impediment from time to time, but his assistance was all I would need.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had overcome the biggest fear of my speech impediment. Speaking in front of large groups was no longer a time where my speech impediment would reveal itself. As the senior class vice president, I was responsible for giving the closing address at graduation, probably the most high-pressure speech of all. For three weeks I rehearsed my graduation speech.

The biggest speech of my life was delivered on June 3, 1995, in front of 2,000 friends, classmates, faculty, and family. The football stadium stands were packed like a Mexican piñata for a Cinco de Mayo celebration. Over 2,000 were in attendance, all to hear my closing address. Walking into the stadium, I looked at the happy but tightly squeezed crowd and realized that this was going to be a special moment in my eighteen-year-old life. More than the high school graduation that the class of 1995 was celebrating, I was celebrating my ability to speak in front of crowds.

For the following two hours I tried listening intently to all of the other speeches. I found myself getting very nervous, but my stutter did not once come to my mind as being a problem. I was only nervous because I was soon going to be on the biggest stage I had ever been on before. Principal Martin gave a short address after we received our diplomas. He then said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the closing address will be given by Class of 1995 Vice President Adrian Boykin."

I looked to the crowd, started slowly, and let my voice flow continuously and smoothly, similar to an eagle soaring through the sky. As I concluded, I looked into the dots of faces in the crowd and my eyes met my father's.

Throwing my graduation cap into the still, windless sky, I celebrated a rite of passage.

ANDREW A. ROONEY was born in 1920 in Albany, New York. Drafted into the army while still a student at Colgate University, he served in the European theater of operations as a *Stars and Stripes* reporter. After the war Rooney began what has been a prolific and illustrious career as a writer-producer for various television networks—chiefly for CBS—and has won numerous awards, including the Writers Guild Award for Best Script of the Year (six times—more than any other writer in the history of the medium) and three National Academy Emmy awards. The author of a number of magazine articles in publications like *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Playboy*, Rooney is nonetheless probably most familiar for his regular appearances as a commentator on the television program *60Minutes*. Rooney also writes a syndicated column, which appears in more than 250 newspapers, and has lectured on documentary writing at various universities. His most recent books are *Pieces of My Mind* (1984), *Word for Word* (1986), *Not That You Asked....* (1989), *Sweet and Sour* (1992), *My War* (1995), *Common Nonsense* (2002), and *Years of Minutes* (2003). He now lives in Rowayton, Connecticut.

In and of Ourselves We Trust

“In and of Ourselves We Trust” was one of Rooney’s syndicated columns. Rooney’s piece uses one simple example to illustrate a generality. He draws from it a far-reaching set of conclusions: that we have a “contract” with each other to stop for red lights – and further, that our whole system of trust depends on everyone doing the right thing.

Last night I was driving from Harrisburg to Lewisburg, Pa., a distance of about 80 miles. It was late, I was late, and if anyone asked me how fast I was driving, I’d have to plead the Fifth Amendment to avoid self-incrimination.

At one point along an open highway, I came to a crossroads with a traffic light. I was alone on the road by now, but as I approached the light, it turned red, and I braked to a halt. I looked left, right, and behind me. Nothing. Not a car, no suggestion of headlights, but there I sat, waiting for the light to change, the only human being, for at least a mile in any direction.

I started wondering why I refused to run the light. I was not afraid of being arrested, because there was obviously no cop anywhere around and there certainly would have been no danger in going through it.

Much later that night, after I’d met with a group in Lewisburg and had climbed into bed near midnight, the question of why I’d stopped for that light came back to me. I think I stopped because it’s part of a contract we all have with each other. It’s not only the law, but it’s an agreement we have, and we trust each other to honor it: We don’t go through red lights. Like most of us, I’m more apt to be restrained from doing something bad by the social convention that disapproves of it than by any law against it.

It’s amazing that we ever trust each other to do the right thing, isn’t it? And we do, too. Trust is our first inclination. We have to make a deliberate decision to mistrust someone or to be suspicious or skeptical.

It’s a darn good thing, too, because the whole structure of our society depends on mutual trust, not distrust. This whole thing we have going for us would fall apart if we didn’t trust each other most of the time. In Italy they have an awful time getting any money for the government because many people just plain don’t pay their income tax. Here, the Internal Revenue Service makes some gestures toward enforcing the law, but mostly they just have to trust that we’ll pay what we owe. There has often been talk of a tax revolt in this country, most recently among unemployed auto workers in Michigan, and our government pretty much admits that if there were a widespread tax revolt here, they wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.

We do what we say we’ll do. We show up when we say we’ll show up.

I was so proud of myself for stopping for that red light. And inasmuch as no one would ever have known what a good person I was on the road from Harrisburg to Lewisburg, I had to tell someone.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. Explain the concept of a “contract we all have with each other” (Par. 4). How is the “agreement” achieved (Par. 4)?
2. Why do you suppose exceeding the speed limit (Par. 1) would not also be included in the “contract”? Or is there some other reason for Rooney’s apparent inconsistency?

3. Explain the significance of the title of this selection.

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. How does the example of the red light “work” for readers? How does an analysis of this example help us better understand each other?
2. What other uses of example do you find in the selection?
3. What, if anything, do the brief examples in Paragraph 6 add to this piece? (See “Guide to Terms”: Evaluation.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. Does it seem to you that the diction and vocabulary levels of this selection are appropriate for the purpose intended? Why or why not? (Guide: Diction.)
2. Could this be classified as a formal essay? Why or why not? (Guide: Essay.)
3. Rooney uses the word “trust” six times in Paragraphs 4–6. How effective is the repetition of such a word? Why might Rooney have chosen this strategy?

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Working in groups of three, list several examples that could help convey a main idea similar to the generality Rooney advances in his essay. Then, together, write a brief essay using these examples and employing a casual tone of voice similar to Rooney’s.
2. Considering Audience: Andy Rooney often appears on television as an oral commentator on events and social behavior. The style of this essay is more similar in some ways to spoken language than written language. How effective is this style for the essay’s audience? Why is it or isn’t it effective? Rewrite Rooney’s essay in a more formal style and analyze the effectiveness of your new version.
3. Developing an Essay: Choose an experience that revealed to you something about your personal characteristics, the traits of family or friends, or the “character” of a larger cultural or social group to which you belong. Using Rooney’s essay as a model, use this experience as an example to illustrate a generality about your subject, and draw also on briefer examples in the course of your essay.

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

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When It's All Too Much

Most of us might readily accept the generalization that having many choices is a good thing. We might be able to provide many examples to support this conclusion. Barry Schwartz's essay moves in the opposite direction. Schwartz points out that having many choices can be a significant problem, and he offers detailed examples to explain his outlook. This selection from *The Paradox of Choice* was published as a magazine article.

One day I went to the GAP to buy a pair of jeans. A salesperson asked if she could help. "I want a pair of jeans—32–28," I said. "Do you want them slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, baggy or extra-baggy?" she replied. "Do you want them stone-washed, acid-washed or distressed? Do you want them button-fly or zipper-fly? Do you want them faded or regular?"

I was stunned. A moment or two later, I sputtered out something like, "I just want regular jeans. You know, the kind that used to be the only kind."

She pointed me in the right direction. The trouble was that with all these options available to me now, I was no longer sure that "regular" jeans were what I wanted. Perhaps the easy fit or the relaxed fit would be more comfortable. So I tried on all the pants and scrutinized myself in a mirror. Whereas very little was riding on my decision, I was now convinced that one of these options had to be right for me, and I was determined to figure it out.

The jeans I chose turned out to be just fine, but it occurred to me that buying a pair of pants should not be a daylong project. Purchasing jeans was once a five-minute affair; now it was a complex decision.

Buying jeans is a trivial matter, but it is an example of a much larger issue. When people have no choice, life can be almost unbearable. As the number of choices increases, the autonomy, control and liberation this variety brings can be powerful and positive.

But if the number of choices keeps growing, negative effects start to appear. As choices grow further, the negatives can escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates us; it might even be said to tyrannize.

The Explosion Of Choices

Modern life has provided a huge array of products to choose from. Just walk into any large supermarket or drugstore looking for hair-care products, and you'll likely be confronted with more than 360 types of shampoo, conditioner and mousse. Need a painkiller? There are 80 options. How about tooth-paste? You have 40 types to pick from.

In addition, we now have to make choices in areas of life in which we used to have few or no options. We have to decide which telephone service providers and retirement pension plans are the best for us. Modern cosmetic surgery allows us to change virtually any aspect of our appearance. An explosion of tolerance for "alternative" lifestyles has given us real choices about whether to be monogamous, whether (and when) to marry, whether (and when) to have kids and even whether to have intimate relations with partners of the same or the opposite sex (or both).

More Choices...More Happiness?

It seems a simple matter of logic that increased choice improves well-being. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Respected social scientists such as psychologist David G. Myers and political scientist Robert E. Lane tell us that increased choice and increased affluence have, in fact, been accompanied by decreased well-being.

The American “happiness quotient” has been going gently but consistently downhill for more than a generation. In the last 30 years—a time of great prosperity—the proportion of the population describing itself as “very happy” has declined. The decline was about 5%. This might not seem like much, but 5% translates into about 14 million Americans.

Not only that, but today, as a society, more Americans than ever are clinically depressed. By some estimates (for example, those of psychologist Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*), depression in the year 2000 was about 10 times as likely as it was in 1900.

Of course, no one believes that a single factor explains this. But accumulating evidence from psychological research indicates that the explosion of choice plays an important role. It seems that as we become freer to pursue and do whatever we want, we get less and less happy.

The More We Have, The More We Want

Increases in our expectations are partly to blame. The more we are allowed to be the masters of our fates, the more we expect to be. We believe we should be able to find work that is exciting, socially valuable and remunerative. We expect spouses who are sexually, emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Our children should be beautiful, smart, affectionate, obedient and independent. And everything we buy is supposed to be the best of its kind.

With all the choices available, we may believe we should never have to settle for things that are just “good enough.” Those who accept only the best, I call maximizers. In my research, I’ve found that maximizers are less happy, less optimistic and more depressed. At the very least, maximizing behavior can lead to dissatisfaction—and, sometimes, paralysis.

I have a friend who makes going out to dinner a nightmare. He struggles to select a dish and changes his mind repeatedly as his companions sit and stew. And I see my students agonize about which of many paths to follow when they graduate. Many of them are looking for jobs that will give them everything, and they expect to find them.

Only Ourselves To Blame

We are told we are now in the driver’s seat when it comes to what happens in our lives. If we fail, it’s our own fault. This might sound only fair, but the pressure we are put under can be enormous—especially in crucial areas of our lives such as medical care.

For example, people in one study were asked whether, if they got cancer, they would want to be in charge of their treatment decisions; 65% said yes. Unless, however, they actually had cancer. Then only 12% said yes. People with cancer have experienced the awesome psychological consequences of being responsible for a life-and-death decision, and they don’t want that responsibility.

Unattainable expectations, plus a tendency to blame ourselves for our failures, make a lethal combination.

This is the paradox: Here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. We get what we say we want, only to discover that it doesn’t satisfy us. The success of 21st-century life turns out to be bittersweet. And I believe that a significant contributing factor is the overabundance of choice.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. What is the expository purpose of this selection? Does the selection have any argumentative purpose as well? If so, explain which purpose you think is most important in the selection, and tell why you think so. (See “Guide to Terms”: Purpose.)
2. The body of this selection contains a number of subheadings. Discuss how these are linked to the overall theme (or thesis) of the essay. Can the essay be considered unified? Why, or why not? (Guide: Unity.)
3. Why is being a “maximizer” not an especially good trait? (See Paragraphs 14–15.)

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. Which paragraph first announces the thesis of this essay? (Is the thesis stated in a single sentence or more than one? If it is stated in more than one sentence, why do you think the writer chose this strategy? Is it effective? Why, or why not? (Guide: Evaluation.)
2. Can the example used to open the essay be considered an extended example? Why, or why not? What specific words or phrases does the writer employ to link this opening example to the paragraph containing the thesis of the essay? How, if at all, does this link indicate the main expository pattern of the selection?
3. What examples and generalizations characterize each of these clusters of paragraphs: 7–8, 9–12, 13–15, and 16–19?
4. Identify the transitional words and phrases the writer uses to link the paragraphs and ideas within each of the clusters identified in question 3. (Guide: Transition.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. What words in Paragraph 7 suggest that the writer views the variety of choices negatively? (Guide: Diction.)
2. What words in Paragraph 8 suggest that the writer considers the options as forced choices that do not necessarily make life better than it was at an earlier time? (Guide: Diction.) Discuss whether the phrase “explosion of tolerance” has negative or positive connotations? (Guide: Connotation and Denotation.)
3. If you do not know the meaning of some of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: scrutinized (Par. 3); autonomy (5); tyrannize (6); affluence (9); quotient (10); paradox (19).

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Some of Schwartz’s examples are brief, such as the mention of kinds of toothpaste or hair products in Paragraph 7. Working in a group, take three brief examples from the text and expand them by making a long list of more specific instances or illustrations. You may wish to alter the examples somewhat, listing types of painkillers, greeting cards, or candy rather than toothpaste, for example.
2. Considering Audience: Schwartz suggests that we might be better off with fewer options. Write a brief description of three situations (relatively unimportant, somewhat important, and very important) in which fewer options might be an improvement. (Or write about situations in which you think the opposite is true: more options would be better.) Poll some of your friends or fellow students to find out whether or not they agree with your conclusions and ask them to explain the reasoning behind their agreement or lack of agreement. Report the responses and reasons in a short paper, indicating also whether you think most readers are likely to agree with either you or the people you have polled.
3. Developing an Essay: Follow Schwartz’s lead in using a series of examples to explain a generality about ways we commonly respond to choices we regularly encounter. Consider including some examples from your own behavior, including ones in which you poke fun at yourself or criticize your own actions.

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

ATUL GAWANDE teaches in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Harvard School of Public Health and is assistant professor of surgery at the Harvard Medical School. He received his B.A. from Stanford University (1987), an M.A. from Oxford University (1989), and his M.D. from Harvard Medical School (1995). Gawande writes the “Notes of a Surgeon” column for the *New England Journal of Medicine* and is a staff writer for the *New Yorker* magazine. He publishes regularly in medical journals, and his book, *Complications: A Surgeon’s Notes on an Imperfect Science*, appeared in 2003.

FULL MOON FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH

In this essay from *Complications*, Atul Gawande uses examples to view a puzzling phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. His examples may change your outlook, confirm it, or leave you just as uncertain as he seems to be at the end of the essay.

Jack Nicklaus would not play a round of golf without three pennies in his pocket. Michael Jordan always had to wear University of North Carolina boxer shorts under his Chicago Bulls uniform. And Duke Ellington would not play a show, or allow his band members to play a show, wearing anything yellow. For people who have to perform for a living, superstitions seem almost *de rigueur*. Baseball players, for example, are notoriously superstitious. Wade Boggs, the Boston Red Sox’s former star third baseman, famously insisted on eating chicken before every game. Tommy Lasorda, on the other hand, when he was managing the Los Angeles Dodgers, always ate linguine—with either red clam sauce if his team was facing a right-handed pitcher, or white if up against a lefty. Even in this crowd, however, the New York Met’s pitcher Turk Wendell seems unusual. For luck during games, he used to wear an animal-fang necklace, refuse to wear socks, never step on the foul line, and brush his teeth between innings. When he signed his contract for the 1999 season, he insisted that his salary be \$1,200,000.99. “Hey, I just like the number ninety-nine,” he told the press.

I have yet to know, however, any doctors with such superstitions. Doctors tend to have a fierce commitment to the rational—surgeons especially. For one of the main satisfactions of science, and operating on people in particular, is the success of logical planning and thinking. If there is a credo in practical medicine, it is that the important thing is to be sensible. And we who are in it are usually uncomfortable, if not outright contemptuous, of the mystical. At the most, you might find a surgeon with a favorite pair of operating shoes or a quirky way of dressing a wound after closing up. And even then we are always careful to account for our idiosyncrasies with at least a plausible-sounding explanation: “Other shoes aren’t as comfortable,” the surgeon might say, or, “That dressing tape causes blisters” (though no one else seems to have trouble with it). As a rule, you will not find doctors saying that, actually, we just think a thing is unlucky.

So it struck me as odd to find, one afternoon when I and my fellow surgical residents sat around a table divvying up the next month’s schedule of nights on emergency room duty, that no one was volunteering to take Friday the thirteenth. We were taking turns making picks, and for the first few rounds, everything seemed normal. We left all the Fridays alone, weekend nights not being popular. But as the nights remaining dwindled to just a few, it became apparent that that one Friday was being conspicuously bypassed. C’mon, I thought, this is ridiculous. So when my turn came up again, I put my name down for duty that night. “Rest up,” one resident said. “You’re going to be in for a busy night.” I laughed and dismissed the idea.

Looking at my calendar a few days later, however, I noticed that the moon would also be full that Friday night. Then someone mentioned that a lunar eclipse would be occurring then, too. And for a moment—only a moment, mind you—I felt my confidence slip. Perhaps I really would be in for a miserable night, I began to think. But being a sober and well-trained doctor, I did not let myself succumb to such thoughts so easily. Surely, I thought, the evidence is against such preposterousness. And then, just to confirm it, I went to the library to check.

I managed to find exactly one scientific study assessing whether or not luck actually does go bad on Friday the thirteenth. (I'm not sure which is more surprising: that people have in fact researched this question, or that I could only find one such example. This is, after all, a world with studies on almost anything you could think of. Once, poking around the library, I even found a report on how saliva distributes around the mouth when chewing gum.) The 1993 study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, compared hospital admissions for traffic accidents on a Friday the thirteenth with those on a Friday the sixth in a community outside London. Despite a lower highway traffic volume on the thirteenth than on the sixth, admissions for traffic accident victims increased 52 percent on the thirteenth. "Friday the thirteenth is unlucky for some," the authors concluded. "Staying at home is recommended." How you escape the bad luck at home they didn't explain.

Still, I told myself, you really can't make much of one study of one Friday the thirteenth in one town. Random variation could easily have accounted for the increase in crashes. You would need to see consistently bad results across a number of studies to be convinced. And that has yet to be shown.

By contrast, one thing that has been shown is that human beings commonly imagine patters (whether good or bad) where really there are none. It's just how our brains work. Even totally random patterns will often appear non-random to us. The statistician William Feller described one now classic example. During the Germans' intensive bombing of South London in the Second World War, a few areas were hit many times over while others were not hit at all. The places that were not hit seemed to have been deliberately spared, and people concluded that those places were where the Germans had their spies. When Feller analyzed the statistics of the bomb hits, however, he found that the distribution was purely random.

This propensity to see nonexistent patterns has been called the Texas-sharpshooter fallacy. Like a Texas sharpshooter who shoots at the side of a barn and then draws a bull's-eye around the bullet holes, we tend to notice unusual occurrences first—four bad things happening on one day, for example—and then define a pattern around them. It seems to me we could just as well have feared Thursday the thirteenth, or Friday the fifth, as Friday the thirteenth. Nonetheless, phobia about Friday the thirteenth is widespread. Based on surveys, Donald Dossey, a North Carolina behavioral scientist, estimates that between seventeen million and twenty-one million Americans suffer mild to severe anxiety or change their activities because of *paraskevidekatriaphobia* (which is Greek for "fear of Friday the thirteenth"). They perform rituals before leaving the house, call in sick to work, or postpone flights or major purchases, causing businesses to lose seven hundred and fifty million dollars annually.

Superstitions about the moon appear to be taken even more seriously. A 1995 poll found that 43 percent of Americans believed that the moon alters individual behavior. And, interestingly, mental health professionals were more likely to believe it than people in other lines of work. The full moon has been thought to be linked to madness for centuries—hence the term "lunatic"—and in disparate civilizations across the world. Certainly, the idea of lunar human cycles seems more plausible than a Friday-the-thirteenth effect. Scientists once dismissed the idea of biological cycles, but now widely accept that seasons can affect mood and behavior and that we all have "circadian rhythms" in which time of day affects body temperature, alertness, memory, and mood.

In a computer search, I managed to find some one hundred studies that attempted to identify "circalunidian" cycles. The most intriguing one I looked up was a five-year study of self-poisoning at a hospital in New South Wales, Australia, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. From 1988 to 1993, the hospital admitted 2,215 patients for overdosing on drugs or poisoning themselves with toxic substances. The researchers checked to see whether peaks in such events occurred not just according to the phase of the moon but also according to one's zodiac sign or numerological reading (as "calculated according to the formulas contained in Zolar's *Encyclopedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge*," the authors reported). To no one's surprise, self-poisoning rates were not affected by whether a patient was born a Virgo or a Libra. Nor did Zolar's "Name Number," "Month Number," or "Birth Path Number" for a person make any difference. However, women (but not men) were about 25 percent less likely to overdose around the time of a full moon than around a new moon.

Strangely enough, this decrease in self-poisonings actually correlated with the results of other studies. If any link between psychology and the full moon exists, it would seem to be protective. The authors of a 1996 study of ten years of suicides in the Dordogne region of France concluded, in charmingly ungrammatical English, that "the French dies less in Full Moon, and more in New Moon period." Studies in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Dade County, Florida, also found a drop in suicides at the full moon. These studies didn't quite clinch the full moon's happy effect, however. Far more studies failed to find any lunar correlation with suicide.

As for other forms of craziness, the moon seems to play no role. Researchers have reviewed logs for calls to police stations, consultations to psychiatrists, homicides, and other records of our daily burden of madness—including, I noticed, emergency room visits. They found no consistent relationship, one way or another, with the moon.

Reassured by this, I was finally able to leave the library convinced that neither the full moon nor the inauspicious date threatened my night on call. A couple of weeks later the appointed evening arrived. I walked into the ER at 6 P.M. sharp to take over from the daytime resident. To my dismay, he was already swamped with patients for me to see. Then, just as soon as I began to get caught up, a fresh trauma came in—a pale and bloodied twenty-eight-year-old knocked unconscious in a high-speed head-on collision. The police and paramedics said he had been stalking his girlfriend with a gun in hand. The cops then arrived and he fled in his car, leading them on a chase that ended in the massive crash.

The rest of the night went no better. I was, as we say, “slammed”—running hard, unable to get two minutes to sit down, hardly able to keep the patients straight.

“It’s a full moon Friday the thirteenth,” a nurse explained.

I was about to say that, actually, the studies show no connection. But my pager went off before I could get the words out of my mouth. I had a new trauma coming in.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. In your own words, state the generalization that is illustrated by the brief examples in the opening paragraph of the essay.
2. a. What generalization begins the second paragraph?
b. To what extent, if at all, do the examples in the paragraph undermine the generalization?
3. What “odd” (Par. 3) phenomenon does the writer decide to investigate? How do Paragraphs 1 and 2 prepare readers for the writer’s evaluation of the phenomenon as “odd” and “ridiculous” (Par. 3)?
4. What reasons does the writer give for deciding to investigate the phenomenon?

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. a. What extended example makes up the bulk of the essay?
b. How would you describe the purpose of this example within the essay as a whole? (See “Guide to Terms”: Purpose.)
2. In which paragraphs does the writer explain reasons for not believing in the truth of “full moon Friday the thirteenth”?
3. In which paragraphs does the writer present and explain reasons for taking “full moon Friday the thirteenth” seriously, or at least somewhat seriously?
4. a. Explain the ways in which the concluding paragraph of the essay (Par. 16) might be considered the writer’s conclusion about “full moon Friday the thirteenth.”
b. What strategy does the writer employ to conclude the essay? (Guide: Closings.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. What words does the writer include in Paragraph 2 that emphasize how highly-educated and (generally) rational surgeons are? (Guide: Diction.)
2. What words in Paragraph 3 emphasize the informal nature of the meeting? (Guide: Diction.)
3. How does the writer use words at the beginning of sentences in Paragraph 4 to indicate his growing uncertainty? (Guide: Diction, Transitions.)
4. In what ways can the phrase “Texas-sharpshooter” be considered ironic? (Guide: Irony.)
5. If you do not know the meaning of some of the following words, look them up in the dictionary: *de rigueur* (Par. 1); contemptuous, mystical, idiosyncracies (Par. 2); phobia (8); correlation (11); trauma (13).

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Beliefs about happenings on the full moon or Friday the thirteenth are widespread. Working in a group, discuss how Gawande's essay might be expanded to groups of people other than surgeons. To do so, create a list of three examples of other groups of people likely to be skeptical of either set of beliefs and three examples that support the sets of beliefs.
2. Considering Audience: Many people display contradictory behaviors toward common sets of beliefs, regarding them both as worthy of respect and as misleading superstitions. Astrology, good luck charms, ways to avoid misfortune, and love potions (or foods) are among the subjects that draw forth contradictory attitudes. Choose one of these or a similar subject and explain briefly the contradictory perspectives readers are likely to bring to an essay exploring the subject.
3. Developing an Essay: Follow Gawande's example, and create an essay that explores differing reactions to a set of common beliefs. You may wish to add to the variety of attitudes that Gawande explores. Here are some perspectives that may serve as starting points: absolute skepticism, complete belief, cautious acceptance, ambivalence, open-mindedness, confusion, suspicion, curiosity, slight uncertainty, and complete neutrality.

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90-91 at the end of this chapter.)

MARY KARR'S highly praised memoir of her Texas childhood and unusual family, *The Liar's Club*, was first published in 1995. It won a PEN Prize and is frequently cited as among the best of the many moving and insightful accounts of growing up that have appeared in recent years. Her memoir of teenage years, *Cherry* (2000) has also been widely praised. Karr, who teaches creative writing at Syracuse University, has also published several volumes of poetry, including *Abacus* (1987) and *The Devil's Tour* (1993).

Dysfunctional Nation

To make the point that her dysfunctional family was far from unique, Karr draws examples from the many stories of other families she heard on a tour to promote her memoir. She suggests, in addition, that growing up in such a setting may not prevent a person from achieving a healthy identity and sense of self as an adult.

When I set out on a book tour to promote the memoir about my less-than-perfect Texas clan, I did so with soul-sucking dread. Surely we'd be held up as grotesques, my beloveds and I. Instead, I shoved into bookstores where sometimes hundreds of people stood claiming to identify with my story, which fact stunned me.

For one thing, my artist mother had been married seven times, twice to my Texas oil-worker daddy, who was Nos. 5 and 7. Both of my parents drank hard enough to hit some jackpots. Both were well armed. (The tile man who came to redo my mother's kitchen last spring pried more than one .22 slug from the wall.)

Yet in towns across this country I sat at various bookstore tables till near closing and heard people posit that reading about my tribe brought not slack-jawed horror, but recognition. Maybe these peoples' family lives differed from mine in terms of surface pyrotechnics—houses set afire and fortunes squandered. But the feelings didn't. After eight weeks of travel, I ginned up this working definition for a dysfunctional family: any family with more than one person in it.

Even the most perfect-looking clan seemed to suffer a rough patch. "I'm from one of these Donna Reed households you always wanted to belong to," said the elegant woman in Chicago. But her doctor daddy got saddled with a wicked malpractice suit, a few more martinis than usual got poured from his silver shaker every night. Rumor was he took up with his nurse.

What happened? "We worked it out. It passed." But not before his Cadillac plowed over her bicycle one drunken night and her mother threatened divorce. Like me, she'd lain awake listening to her parents storm around in the masks of monsters and felt the metaphorical foundations of her house tremble, hopeless to prop it all up.

Not all folks reported such rough times as mere blips on the family time line. In fact, I met dozens of people from way more chaotic households than mine. One guy's drug-dealer parents allegedly dragged him across several borders with bags of heroin taped under his Doctor Denton sleeper. Another woman had, at age 5, watched her alcoholic mother stick her head in a noose and step off a kitchen stool while the girl fought to shield her toddler brother's eyes. Surely many don't survive such childhoods intact (or they don't go to book signings because they're too busy being serial killers). But the myth that such a childhood condemns you to a life curled up in the back ward of a mental institution dissolved for me. On the surface, people seemed to have got over their troubled upbringings.

The female therapist in a Portland bookstore talked specifically about the power of narrative in her life. She'd been raised by a chronic schizophrenic. On a given day, her school clothes were selected by God himself talking to her mother through scalp implants. The girl got good at worming her way into the homes of neighbors and any halfway decent teacher. In college, she fought depression with counseling she continued for nearly 10 years.

At 50, happily married, she wore a Burberry raincoat and toted a briefcase of fine leather. She showed no visible signs of trauma. The real miracle? She was in fairly close touch with her mother, whose psychosis had diminished with new medications.

In part, this woman claimed to have survived through stories. Traditional therapy, of course, starts with retelling family dramas. Talk about it, in the old wisdom, and the hurt eventually recedes. From narratives about her childhood, a self eventually emerged. Her tendency otherwise would have been to lop herself off from her own past, to make a false self for navigating the world. But false selves rarely withstand the real blows life delivers, hence, her need for stories, her own and other peoples’.

In our longing for some assurance that we’re behaving O.K. inside fairly isolated families, personal experience has assumed some new power. Just as the novel form once took up experiences of urban, industrialized society that weren’t being handled in epic poems or epistles, so memoir – with its single, intensely personal voice – wrestles subjects in a way readers of late find compelling. The good ones I’ve read confirm my experience in a flawed family. They reassure the same way belonging to a community reassures.

My bookstore chats did the same. On the road, I came to believe that our families are working, albeit in new forms. People go on birthing babies and burying dead and loving those with whom they’ve shared deeply wretched patches of history. We do this partly by telling stories, in voices that seek neither to deny family struggles nor to make demons of our beloveds.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. What conclusion about families does Karr offer in Paragraph 3? What examples does she provide to illustrate and support this generality?
2. Does Karr believe our identities and well being are primarily determined by our family backgrounds? If so, where in the essay does she make this point? If not, what else does she believe shapes who we are?

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. Explain how the statement, “On the surface, people seemed to have got over their troubled upbringings” (Par. 6), serves both to separate the two halves of the essay and to link them (see “Guide to Terms”: Transition). In what ways does the second half of the essay answer questions suggested by the statement?
2. In what specific ways does the example in the second half of the essay (Pars. 7-9) and the way it is presented differ from the examples in the first half? How much space does the writer devote to presenting the later example and how much to commenting on and interpreting it?
3. What strategy does the writer employ to conclude the essay? (Guide: Closings.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. Karr uses a number of vivid phrases in the course of the essay: “soul-sucking dread” (Par. 1); “drank hard enough to hit some jackpots” (2); “in the masks of monsters” and “the metaphorical foundations of her house” (5). Tell what each of these phrases means and what it contributes to the essay’s effectiveness.
2. If you do not know the meaning of any of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: memoir, grotesques (Par. 1); pyrotechnics, squandered, ginned, dysfunctional (3); trauma, psychosis (8); epistles (10); albeit (11).

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Karr’s essay touches on a variety of subjects, including storytelling, alcoholism, and family relationships. Make a list of all the subjects she mentions, and then choose two that you find most interesting. Then for each subject, make a list of topics or issues you might wish to explore in an essay of your own. Share your list with a group of classmates, asking them to identify topics they find most intriguing. Do the same for their lists, and, as a group, decide which topics are the most compelling and why.

2. Considering Audience: Other than the ones Karr discusses, what situations, relationships, or social forces make it hard for people to establish healthy identities? How many of these is the average person likely to encounter in his or her life? How many are they likely to know about from other people's experiences? How do people learn about such matters if not from their own experiences? Prepare a short essay discussing why readers in general would be likely to be comfortable or uncomfortable with an essay that presents examples of each type of negative situation, relationship, or social force. Include an explanation of why different groups of readers might react in different ways.
3. Developing an Essay: Karr begins her essay by describing a situation that surprised her by turning out to be the opposite of what she expected. Use this strategy to begin an essay of your own, and then go on to explore what you learned through the experience (just as Karr does).

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90-91 at the end of this chapter.)

BARRY SCHWARTZ

BARRY SCHWARTZ is Dorwin Cartwright Professor of Social Theory and Social Action at Swarthmore College, where he teaches courses in psychology and economics. He received his B.A. from New York University and his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. His articles have appeared in numerous scholarly journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *American Psychologist*, *Society*, *Academe*, *Behaviorism*, *Scientific American*, *USA Today*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *New York Times*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Among his books are *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (2004), *The Battle for Human Nature: Science, Morality, and Modern Life* (1986), *Learning and Memory* (1991) (coauthor), and *Behaviorism, Science, and Human Nature* (1982).

When It's All Too Much

Most of us might readily accept the generalization that having many choices is a good thing. We might be able to provide many examples to support this conclusion. Barry Schwartz's essay moves in the opposite direction. Schwartz points out that having many choices can be a significant problem, and he offers detailed examples to explain his outlook. This selection from *The Paradox of Choice* was published as a magazine article.

One day I went to the GAP to buy a pair of jeans. A salesperson asked if she could help. "I want a pair of jeans—32-28," I said. "Do you want them slim fit, easy fit, relaxed fit, baggy or extra-baggy?" she replied. "Do you want them stone-washed, acid-washed or distressed? Do you want them button-fly or zipper-fly? Do you want them faded or regular?"

I was stunned. A moment or two later, I sputtered out something like, "I just want regular jeans. You know, the kind that used to be the only kind."

She pointed me in the right direction. The trouble was that with all these options available to me now, I was no longer sure that "regular" jeans were what I wanted. Perhaps the easy fit or the relaxed fit would be more comfortable. So I tried on all the pants and scrutinized myself in a mirror. Whereas very little was riding on my decision, I was now convinced that one of these options had to be right for me, and I was determined to figure it out.

The jeans I chose turned out to be just fine, but it occurred to me that buying a pair of pants should not be a daylong project. Purchasing jeans was once a five-minute affair; now it was a complex decision.

Buying jeans is a trivial matter, but it is an example of a much larger issue. When people have no choice, life can be almost unbearable. As the number of choices increases, the autonomy, control and liberation this variety brings can be powerful and positive.

But if the number of choices keeps growing, negative effects start to appear. As choices grow further, the negatives can escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates us; it might even be said to tyrannize.

The Explosion Of Choices

Modern life has provided a huge array of products to choose from. Just walk into any large supermarket or drugstore looking for hair-care products, and you'll likely be confronted with more than 360 types of shampoo, conditioner and mousse. Need a painkiller? There are 80 options. How about tooth-paste? You have 40 types to pick from.

In addition, we now have to make choices in areas of life in which we used to have few or no options. We have to decide which telephone service providers and retirement pension plans are the best for us. Modern cosmetic surgery allows us to change virtually any aspect of our appearance. An explosion of tolerance for “alternative” lifestyles has given us real choices about whether to be monogamous, whether (and when) to marry, whether (and when) to have kids and even whether to have intimate relations with partners of the same or the opposite sex (or both).

More Choices...More Happiness?

It seems a simple matter of logic that increased choice improves well-being. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Respected social scientists such as psychologist David G. Myers and political scientist Robert E. Lane tell us that increased choice and increased affluence have, in fact, been accompanied by decreased well-being.

The American “happiness quotient” has been going gently but consistently downhill for more than a generation. In the last 30 years—a time of great prosperity—the proportion of the population describing itself as “very happy” has declined. The decline was about 5%. This might not seem like much, but 5% translates into about 14 million Americans.

Not only that, but today, as a society, more Americans than ever are clinically depressed. By some estimates (for example, those of psychologist Martin Seligman in his book *Learned Optimism*), depression in the year 2000 was about 10 times as likely as it was in 1900.

Of course, no one believes that a single factor explains this. But accumulating evidence from psychological research indicates that the explosion of choice plays an important role. It seems that as we become freer to pursue and do whatever we want, we get less and less happy.

The More We Have, The More We Want

Increases in our expectations are partly to blame. The more we are allowed to be the masters of our fates, the more we expect to be. We believe we should be able to find work that is exciting, socially valuable and remunerative. We expect spouses who are sexually, emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Our children should be beautiful, smart, affectionate, obedient and independent. And everything we buy is supposed to be the best of its kind.

With all the choices available, we may believe we should never have to settle for things that are just “good enough.” Those who accept only the best, I call maximizers. In my research, I’ve found that maximizers are less happy, less optimistic and more depressed. At the very least, maximizing behavior can lead to dissatisfaction—and, sometimes, paralysis.

I have a friend who makes going out to dinner a nightmare. He struggles to select a dish and changes his mind repeatedly as his companions sit and stew. And I see my students agonize about which of many paths to follow when they graduate. Many of them are looking for jobs that will give them everything, and they expect to find them.

Only Ourselves To Blame

We are told we are now in the driver’s seat when it comes to what happens in our lives. If we fail, it’s our own fault. This might sound only fair, but the pressure we are put under can be enormous—especially in crucial areas of our lives such as medical care.

For example, people in one study were asked whether, if they got cancer, they would want to be in charge of their treatment decisions; 65% said yes. Unless, however, they actually had cancer. Then only 12% said yes. People with cancer have experienced the awesome psychological consequences of being responsible for a life-and-death decision, and they don’t want that responsibility.

Unattainable expectations, plus a tendency to blame ourselves for our failures, make a lethal combination.

This is the paradox: Here we are, living at the pinnacle of human possibility, awash in material abundance. We get what we say we want, only to discover that it doesn’t satisfy us. The success of 21st-century life turns out to be bittersweet. And I believe that a significant contributing factor is the overabundance of choice.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. What is the expository purpose of this selection? Does the selection have any argumentative purpose as well? If so, explain which purpose you think is most important in the selection, and tell why you think so. (See “Guide to Terms”: Purpose.)
2. The body of this selection contains a number of subheadings. Discuss how these are linked to the overall theme (or thesis) of the essay. Can the essay be considered unified? Why, or why not? (Guide: Unity.)
3. Why is being a “maximizer” not an especially good trait? (See Paragraphs 14–15.)

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. Which paragraph first announces the thesis of this essay? (Is the thesis stated in a single sentence or more than one? If it is stated in more than one sentence, why do you think the writer chose this strategy? Is it effective? Why, or why not? (Guide: Evaluation.)
2. Can the example used to open the essay be considered an extended example? Why, or why not? What specific words or phrases does the writer employ to link this opening example to the paragraph containing the thesis of the essay? How, if at all, does this link indicate the main expository pattern of the selection?
3. What examples and generalizations characterize each of these clusters of paragraphs: 7–8, 9–12, 13–15, and 16–19?
4. Identify the transitional words and phrases the writer uses to link the paragraphs and ideas within each of the clusters identified in question 3. (Guide: Transition.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. What words in Paragraph 7 suggest that the writer views the variety of choices negatively? (Guide: Diction.)
2. What words in Paragraph 8 suggest that the writer considers the options as forced choices that do not necessarily make life better than it was at an earlier time? (Guide: Diction.) Discuss whether the phrase “explosion of tolerance” has negative or positive connotations? (Guide: Connotation and Denotation.)
3. If you do not know the meaning of some of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: scrutinized (Par. 3); autonomy (5); tyrannize (6); affluence (9); quotient (10); paradox (19).

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Some of Schwartz’s examples are brief, such as the mention of kinds of toothpaste or hair products in Paragraph 7. Working in a group, take three brief examples from the text and expand them by making a long list of more specific instances or illustrations. You may wish to alter the examples somewhat, listing types of painkillers, greeting cards, or candy rather than toothpaste, for example.
2. Considering Audience: Schwartz suggests that we might be better off with fewer options. Write a brief description of three situations (relatively unimportant, somewhat important, and very important) in which fewer options might be an improvement. (Or write about situations in which you think the opposite is true: more options would be better.) Poll some of your friends or fellow students to find out whether or not they agree with your conclusions and ask them to explain the reasoning behind their agreement or lack of agreement. Report the responses and reasons in a short paper, indicating also whether you think most readers are likely to agree with either you or the people you have polled.
3. Developing an Essay: Follow Schwartz’s lead in using a series of examples to explain a generality about ways we commonly respond to choices we regularly encounter. Consider including some examples from your own behavior, including ones in which you poke fun at yourself or criticize your own actions.

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

Atul Gawande

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Full Moon Friday the Thirteenth

In this essay from *Complications*, Atul Gawande uses examples to view a puzzling phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. His examples may change your outlook, confirm it, or leave you just as uncertain as he seems to be at the end of the essay.

Jack Nicklaus would not play a round of golf without three pennies in his pocket. Michael Jordan always had to wear University of North Carolina boxer shorts under his Chicago Bulls uniform. And Duke Ellington would not play a show, or allow his band members to play a show, wearing anything yellow. For people who have to perform for a living, superstitions seem almost *de rigueur*. Baseball players, for example, are notoriously superstitious. Wade Boggs, the Boston Red Sox’s former star third baseman, famously insisted on eating chicken before every game. Tommy Lasorda, on the other hand, when he was managing the Los Angeles Dodgers, always ate linguine—with either red clam sauce if his team was facing a right-handed pitcher, or white if up against a lefty. Even in this crowd, however, the New York Met’s pitcher Turk Wendell seems unusual. For luck during games, he used to wear an animal-fang necklace, refuse to wear socks, never step on the foul line, and brush his teeth between innings. When he signed his contract for the 1999 season, he insisted that his salary be \$1,200,000.99. “Hey, I just like the number ninety-nine,” he told the press.

I have yet to know, however, any doctors with such superstitions. Doctors tend to have a fierce commitment to the rational—surgeons especially. For one of the main satisfactions of science, and operating on people in particular, is the success of logical planning and thinking. If there is a credo in practical medicine, it is that the important thing is to be sensible. And we who are in it are usually uncomfortable, if not outright contemptuous, of the mystical. At the most, you might find a surgeon with a favorite pair of operating shoes or a quirky way of dressing a wound after closing up. And even then we are always careful to account for our idiosyncrasies with at least a plausible-sounding explanation: “Other shoes aren’t as comfortable,” the surgeon might say, or, “That dressing tape causes blisters” (though no one else seems to have trouble with it). As a rule, you will not find doctors saying that, actually, we just think a thing is unlucky.

So it struck me as odd to find, one afternoon when I and my fellow surgical residents sat around a table divvying up the next month’s schedule of nights on emergency room duty, that no one was volunteering to take Friday the thirteenth. We were taking turns making picks, and for the first few rounds, everything seemed normal. We left all the Fridays alone, weekend nights not being popular. But as the nights remaining dwindled to just a few, it became apparent that that one Friday was being conspicuously bypassed. C’mon, I thought, this is ridiculous. So when my turn came up again, I put my name down for duty that night. “Rest up,” one resident said. “You’re going to be in for a busy night.” I laughed and dismissed the idea.

Looking at my calendar a few days later, however, I noticed that the moon would also be full that Friday night. Then someone mentioned that a lunar eclipse would be occurring then, too. And for a moment—only a moment, mind you—I felt my confidence slip. Perhaps I really would be in for a miserable night, I began to think. But being a sober and well-trained doctor, I did not let myself succumb to such thoughts so easily. Surely, I thought, the evidence is against such preposterousness. And then, just to confirm it, I went to the library to check.

I managed to find exactly one scientific study assessing whether or not luck actually does go bad on Friday the thirteenth. (I’m not sure which is more surprising: that people have in fact researched this question, or that I could only find one such example. This is, after all, a world with studies on almost anything you could think of. Once, poking around the library, I even found a report on how saliva distributes around the mouth when chewing gum.) The 1993 study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, compared hospital admissions for traffic accidents on a Friday the thirteenth with those on a Friday the sixth in a community outside London. Despite a lower highway traffic volume on the thirteenth than on the sixth, admissions for traffic accident victims increased 52 percent on the thirteenth. “Friday the thirteenth is unlucky for some,” the authors concluded. “Staying at home is recommended.” How you escape the bad luck at home they didn’t explain.

Still, I told myself, you really can't make much of one study of one Friday the thirteenth in one town. Random variation could easily have accounted for the increase in crashes. You would need to see consistently bad results across a number of studies to be convinced. And that has yet to be shown.

By contrast, one thing that has been shown is that human beings commonly imagine patterns (whether good or bad) where really there are none. It's just how our brains work. Even totally random patterns will often appear non-random to us. The statistician William Feller described one now classic example. During the Germans' intensive bombing of South London in the Second World War, a few areas were hit many times over while others were not hit at all. The places that were not hit seemed to have been deliberately spared, and people concluded that those places were where the Germans had their spies. When Feller analyzed the statistics of the bomb hits, however, he found that the distribution was purely random.

This propensity to see nonexistent patterns has been called the Texas-sharpshooter fallacy. Like a Texas sharpshooter who shoots at the side of a barn and then draws a bull's-eye around the bullet holes, we tend to notice unusual occurrences first—four bad things happening on one day, for example—and then define a pattern around them. It seems to me we could just as well have feared Thursday the thirteenth, or Friday the fifth, as Friday the thirteenth. Nonetheless, phobia about Friday the thirteenth is widespread. Based on surveys, Donald Dossey, a North Carolina behavioral scientist, estimates that between seventeen million and twenty-one million Americans suffer mild to severe anxiety or change their activities because of *paraskevidekatriaphobia* (which is Greek for "fear of Friday the thirteenth"). They perform rituals before leaving the house, call in sick to work, or postpone flights or major purchases, causing businesses to lose seven hundred and fifty million dollars annually.

Superstitions about the moon appear to be taken even more seriously. A 1995 poll found that 43 percent of Americans believed that the moon alters individual behavior. And, interestingly, mental health professionals were more likely to believe it than people in other lines of work. The full moon has been thought to be linked to madness for centuries—hence the term "lunatic"—and in disparate civilizations across the world. Certainly, the idea of lunar human cycles seems more plausible than a Friday-the-thirteenth effect. Scientists once dismissed the idea of biological cycles, but now widely accept that seasons can affect mood and behavior and that we all have "circadian rhythms" in which time of day affects body temperature, alertness, memory, and mood.

In a computer search, I managed to find some one hundred studies that attempted to identify "circalunidian" cycles. The most intriguing one I looked up was a five-year study of self-poisoning at a hospital in New South Wales, Australia, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. From 1988 to 1993, the hospital admitted 2,215 patients for overdosing on drugs or poisoning themselves with toxic substances. The researchers checked to see whether peaks in such events occurred not just according to the phase of the moon but also according to one's zodiac sign or numerological reading (as "calculated according to the formulas contained in Zolar's *Encyclopedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge*," the authors reported). To no one's surprise, self-poisoning rates were not affected by whether a patient was born a Virgo or a Libra. Nor did Zolar's "Name Number," "Month Number," or "Birth Path Number" for a person make any difference. However, women (but not men) were about 25 percent less likely to overdose around the time of a full moon than around a new moon.

Strangely enough, this decrease in self-poisonings actually correlated with the results of other studies. If any link between psychology and the full moon exists, it would seem to be protective. The authors of a 1996 study of ten years of suicides in the Dordogne region of France concluded, in charmingly ungrammatical English, that "the French dies less in Full Moon, and more in New Moon period." Studies in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and Dade County, Florida, also found a drop in suicides at the full moon. These studies didn't quite clinch the full moon's happy effect, however. Far more studies failed to find any lunar correlation with suicide.

As for other forms of craziness, the moon seems to play no role. Researchers have reviewed logs for calls to police stations, consultations to psychiatrists, homicides, and other records of our daily burden of madness—including, I noticed, emergency room visits. They found no consistent relationship, one way or another, with the moon.

Reassured by this, I was finally able to leave the library convinced that neither the full moon nor the inauspicious date threatened my night on call. A couple of weeks later the appointed evening arrived. I walked into the ER at 6 P.M. sharp to take over from the daytime resident. To my dismay, he was already swamped with patients for me to see. Then, just as soon as I began to get caught up, a fresh trauma came in—a pale and bloodied twenty-eight-year-old knocked unconscious in a high-speed head-on collision. The police and paramedics said he had been stalking his girlfriend with a gun in hand. The cops then arrived and he fled in his car, leading them on a chase that ended in the massive crash.

The rest of the night went no better. I was, as we say, “slammed” —running hard, unable to get two minutes to sit down, hardly able to keep the patients straight.

“It’s a full moon Friday the thirteenth,” a nurse explained.

I was about to say that, actually, the studies show no connection. But my pager went off before I could get the words out of my mouth. I had a new trauma coming in.

MEANINGS AND VALUES

1. In your own words, state the generalization that is illustrated by the brief examples in the opening paragraph of the essay.
2. a. What generalization begins the second paragraph?
b. To what extent, if at all, do the examples in the paragraph undermine the generalization?
3. What “odd” (Par. 3) phenomenon does the writer decide to investigate? How do Paragraphs 1 and 2 prepare readers for the writer’s evaluation of the phenomenon as “odd” and “ridiculous” (Par. 3)?
4. What reasons does the writer give for deciding to investigate the phenomenon?

EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

1. a. What extended example makes up the bulk of the essay?
b. How would you describe the purpose of this example within the essay as a whole? (See “Guide to Terms”: Purpose.)
2. In which paragraphs does the writer explain reasons for not believing in the truth of “full moon Friday the thirteenth”?
3. In which paragraphs does the writer present and explain reasons for taking “full moon Friday the thirteenth” seriously, or at least somewhat seriously?
4. a. Explain the ways in which the concluding paragraph of the essay (Par. 16) might be considered the writer’s conclusion about “full moon Friday the thirteenth.”
b. What strategy does the writer employ to conclude the essay? (Guide: Closings.)

DICTION AND VOCABULARY

1. What words does the writer include in Paragraph 2 that emphasize how highly-educated and (generally) rational surgeons are? (Guide: Diction.)
2. What words in Paragraph 3 emphasize the informal nature of the meeting? (Guide: Diction.)
3. How does the writer use words at the beginning of sentences in Paragraph 4 to indicate his growing uncertainty? (Guide: Diction, Transitions.)
 4. In what ways can the phrase “Texas-sharpshooter” be considered ironic? (Guide: Irony.)
5. If you do not know the meaning of some of the following words, look them up in the dictionary: *de rigueur* (Par. 1); *contemptuous*, *mystical*, *idiosyncracies* (Par. 2); *phobia* (8); *correlation* (11); *trauma* (13).

READ TO WRITE

1. Collaborating: Beliefs about happenings on the full moon or Friday the thirteenth are widespread. Working in a group, discuss how Gawande’s essay might be expanded to groups of people other than surgeons. To do so, create a list of three examples of other groups of people likely to be skeptical of either set of beliefs and three examples that support the sets of beliefs.
2. Considering Audience: Many people display contradictory behaviors toward common sets of beliefs, regarding them both as worthy of respect and as misleading superstitions. Astrology, good luck charms, ways to avoid misfortune, and love potions (or foods) are among the subjects that draw forth contradictory attitudes. Choose one of these or a similar subject and explain briefly the contradictory perspectives readers are likely to bring to an essay exploring the subject.

3. Developing an Essay: Follow Gawande's example, and create an essay that explores differing reactions to a set of common beliefs. You may wish to add to the variety of attitudes that Gawande explores. Here are some perspectives that may serve as starting points: absolute skepticism, complete belief, cautious acceptance, ambivalence, open-mindedness, confusion, suspicion, curiosity, slight uncertainty, and complete neutrality.

(NOTE: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of EXAMPLE are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

Mary Karr

Mary Karr's highly praised memoir of her Texas childhood and unusual family, *The Liar's Club*, was first published in 1995. It won a PEN Prize and is frequently cited as among the best of the many moving and insightful accounts of growing up that have appeared in recent years. Her memoir of teenage years, *Cherry* (2000) has also been widely praised. Karr, who teaches creative writing at Syracuse University, has also published several volumes of poetry, including *Abacus* (1987) and *The Devil's Tour* (1993).

Dysfunctional Nation

To make the point that her dysfunctional family was far from unique, Karr draws examples from the many stories of other families she heard on a tour to promote her memoir. She suggests, in addition, that growing up in such a setting may not prevent a person from achieving a healthy identity and sense of self as an adult.

When I set out on a book tour to promote the memoir about my less-than-perfect Texas clan, I did so with soul-sucking dread. Surely we'd be held up as grotesques, my beloveds and I. Instead, I shoved into bookstores where sometimes hundreds of people stood claiming to identify with my story, which fact stunned me.

For one thing, my artist mother had been married seven times, twice to my Texas oil-worker daddy, who was Nos. 5 and 7. Both of my parents drank hard enough to hit some jackpots. Both were well armed. (The tile man who came to redo my mother's kitchen last spring pried more than one .22 slug from the wall.)

Yet in towns across this country I sat at various bookstore tables till near closing and heard people posit that reading about my tribe brought not slack-jawed horror, but recognition. Maybe these peoples' family lives differed from mine in terms of surface pyrotechnics—houses set afire and fortunes squandered. But the feelings didn't. After eight weeks of travel, I ginned up this working definition for a dysfunctional family: any family with more than one person in it.

Even the most perfect-looking clan seemed to suffer a rough patch. "I'm from one of these Donna Reed households you always wanted to belong to," said the elegant woman in Chicago. But her doctor daddy got saddled with a wicked malpractice suit, a few more martinis than usual got poured from his silver shaker every night. Rumor was he took up with his nurse.

What happened? "We worked it out. It passed." But not before his Cadillac plowed over her bicycle one drunken night and her mother threatened divorce. Like me, she'd lain awake listening to her parents storm around in the masks of monsters and felt the metaphorical foundations of her house tremble, hopeless to prop it all up.

Not all folks reported such rough times as mere blips on the family time line. In fact, I met dozens of people from way more chaotic households than mine. One guy's drug-dealer parents allegedly dragged him across several borders with bags of heroin taped under his Doctor Denton sleeper. Another woman had, at age 5, watched her alcoholic mother stick her head in a noose and step off a kitchen stool while the girl fought to shield her toddler brother's eyes. Surely many don't survive such childhoods intact (or they don't go to book signings because they're too busy being serial killers). But the myth that such a childhood condemns you to a life curled up in the back ward of a mental institution dissolved for me. On the surface, people seemed to have got over their troubled upbringings.

The female therapist in a Portland bookstore talked specifically about the power of narrative in her life. She'd been raised by a chronic schizophrenic. On a given day, her school clothes were selected by God himself talking to her mother through scalp implants. The girl got good at worming her way into the homes of neighbors and any halfway decent teacher. In college, she fought depression with counseling she continued for nearly 10 years. At 50, happily married, she wore a Burberry raincoat and toted a briefcase of fine leather. She showed no visible signs of trauma. The real miracle? She was in fairly close touch with her mother, whose psychosis had diminished with new medications.

In part, this woman claimed to have survived through stories. Traditional therapy, of course, starts with retelling family dramas. Talk about it, in the old wisdom, and the hurt eventually recedes. From narratives about her childhood, a self eventually emerged. Her tendency otherwise would have been to lop herself off from her own past, to make a false self for navigating the world. But false selves rarely withstand the real blows life delivers, hence, her need for stories, her own and other peoples'.

In our longing for some assurance that we're behaving O.K. inside fairly isolated families, personal experience has assumed some new power. Just as the novel form once took up experiences of urban, industrialized society that weren't being handled in epic poems or epistles, so memoir—with its single, intensely personal voice—wrestles subjects in a way readers of late find compelling. The good ones I've read confirm my experience in a flawed family. They reassure the same way belonging to a community reassures.

My bookstore chats did the same. On the road, I came to believe that our families are working, albeit in new forms. People go on birthing babies and burying dead and loving those with whom they've shared deeply wretched patches of history. We do this partly by telling stories, in voices that seek neither to deny family struggles nor to make demons of our beloveds.

Meanings and Values

1. What conclusion about families does Karr offer in Paragraph 3? What examples does she provide to illustrate and support this generality?
2. Does Karr believe our identities and well being are primarily determined by our family backgrounds? If so, where in the essay does she make this point? If not, what else does she believe shapes who we are?

Expository Techniques

1. Explain how the statement, "On the surface, people seemed to have got over their troubled upbringings" (Par. 6), serves both to separate the two halves of the essay and to link them (see "Guide to Terms": Transition). In what ways does the second half of the essay answer questions suggested by the statement?
2. In what specific ways does the example in the second half of the essay (Pars. 7–9) and the way it is presented differ from the examples in the first half? How much space does the writer devote to presenting the later example and how much to commenting on and interpreting it?
3. What strategy does the writer employ to conclude the essay? (Guide: Closings.)

Diction and Vocabulary

1. Karr uses a number of vivid phrases in the course of the essay: "soul-sucking dread" (Par. 1); "drank hard enough to hit some jackpots" (2); "in the masks of monsters" and "the metaphorical foundations of her house" (5). Tell what each of these phrases means and what it contributes to the essay's effectiveness.
2. If you do not know the meaning of any of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: memoir, grotesques (Par. 1); pyrotechnics, squandered, ginned, dysfunctional (3); trauma, psychosis (8); epistles (10); albeit (11).

Read to Write

1. Collaborating: Karr's essay touches on a variety of subjects, including storytelling, alcoholism, and family relationships. Make a list of all the subjects she mentions, and then choose two that you find most interesting. Then for each subject, make a list of topics or issues you might wish to explore in an essay of your own. Share your list with a group of classmates, asking them to identify topics they find most intriguing. Do the same for their lists, and, as a group, decide which topics are the most compelling and why.
2. Considering Audience: Other than the ones Karr discusses, what situations, relationships, or social forces make it hard for people to establish healthy identities? How many of these is the average person likely to encounter in his or her life? How many are they likely to know about from other people's experiences? How do people learn about such matters if not from their own experiences? Prepare a short essay discussing why readers in general would be likely to be comfortable or uncomfortable with an essay that presents examples of each type of negative situation, relationship, or social force. Include an explanation of why different groups of readers might react in different ways.
3. Developing an Essay: Karr begins her essay by describing a situation that surprised her by turning out to be the opposite of what she expected. Use this strategy to begin an essay of your own, and then go on to explore what you learned through the experience (just as Karr does).

(Note: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of example are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

Issues and Ideas

Identities

- Wil Haygood, *Underground Dads*
- Alan Buczynski, *Iron Bonding*

- Susan Straight, *Cartilage*

Discovering (or constructing) our identities—the attitudes, feelings, and ways of behaving that make us individuals—is an ongoing job for most people. Personal identity is a favorite topic for writers, too, because it plays an important role in determining what we believe and how we act.

Though they may agree on its importance, writers are just as likely to disagree about the meaning of “identity” and to argue over whether each of us has one true identity or many different ones. For some, identity is the sum of what we are as individuals, the product of our unique experiences and personal outlooks. For others, it is part of the “character” we share with people who are shaped by similar social and cultural forces. For still others, an identity is a role we construct for ourselves and play in specific settings or for particular purposes, and we are likely to have more than one identity.

The first three essays in this chapter (by Andy Rooney, Barry Schwartz, and Mary Karr) alert readers to some of the perspectives that shape our lives. The three essays that follow (by Wil Haygood, Alan Buczynski, and Susan Straight) offer generalities and examples that focus more specifically on the various ways we discover, construct, use, and struggle with our various identities.

Wil Haygood

After graduating from college, Wil Haygood began his career as a writer with the *Charlestown Gazette* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He then spent seventeen years with the *Boston Globe* as a staff writer and currently writes for the Style section of the *Washington Post*. His four nonfiction books are *Two on the River* (1987), *King of Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* (1993), *The Haygoods of Columbus: A Love Story* (1997), and *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (2003).

Underground Dads

Parents generally play key roles in shaping our identities, but what happens to someone who has not one parent or two, but a number of people who fill the role? Using as examples the men who acted as “underground fathers” for him, Haygood explains how unconventional parenting of the kind he experienced as a boy can be loving, supportive, and successful. This essay first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*.

For years, while growing up, I shamelessly told my playmates that I didn’t have a father. In my neighborhood, where men went to work with lunch pails, my friends thought there was a gaping hole in my household. My father never came to the park with me to toss a softball, never came to see me in any of my school plays. I’d explain to friends, with the simplicity of explaining to someone that there are, in some woods, no deer, that I just had no father. My friends looked at me and squinted. My mother and father had divorced shortly after my birth. As the years rolled by, however, I did not have the chance to turn into the pitiful little black boy who had been abandoned by his father. There was a reason: other men showed up. They were warm, honest (at least as far as my eyes could see) and big-hearted. They were the good black men in the shadows, the men who taught me right from wrong, who taught me how to behave, who told me, by their very actions, that they expected me to do good things in life.

There are heartbreaking statistics tossed about regarding single-parent black households these days, about children growing up fatherless. Those statistics must be considered. But how do you count the other men, the ones who show up—with perfect timing, with a kind of soft-stepping loveliness—to give a hand, to take a boy to watch airplanes lift off, to show a young boy the beauty of planting tomatoes in the ground and to tell a child that all of life is not misery?

In my life, there was Jerry, who hauled junk. He had a lean body and a sweet smile. He walked like a cowboy, all bowlegged, swinging his shoulders. It was almost a strut. The sound of his pickup truck rumbling down our alley in Columbus, Ohio, could raise me from sleep.

When he wasn’t hauling junk, Jerry fixed things. More than once, he fixed my red bicycle. The gears were always slipping; the chain could turn into a tangled mess. Hearing pain in my voice, Jerry would instruct me to leave my bike on our front porch. In our neighborhood, in the 60’s, no one would steal your bike from your porch. Jerry promised me he’d pick it up, and he always did. He never lied to me, and he cautioned me not to tell lies. He was, off and on, my mother’s boyfriend. At raucous family gatherings, he’d pull me aside and explain to me the importance of honesty, of doing what one promised to do.

And there was Jimmy, my grandfather, who all his life paid his bills the day they arrived: that was a mighty lesson in itself—it taught me a work ethic. He held two jobs, and there were times when he allowed me to accompany him on his night job, when he cleaned a Greek restaurant on the north side of Columbus. Often he’d mop the place twice, as if trying to win some award. He frightened me too. It was not because he was mean. It was because he had exacting standards, and there were times when I didn’t measure up to those standards. He didn’t like shortcuts. His instructions, on anything, were to be

carried out to the letter. He believed in independence, doing as much for yourself as you possibly could. It should not have surprised me when, one morning while having stomach pains, he chose not to wait for a taxi and instead walked the mile to the local hospital, where he died a week later of stomach cancer.

My uncles provided plenty of good background music when I was coming of age. Uncle Henry took me fishing. He'd phone the night before. "Be ready. Seven o'clock." I'd trail him through woods—as a son does a father—until we found our fishing hole. We'd sit for hours. He taught me patience and an appreciation of the outdoors, of nature. He talked, incessantly, of family—his family, my family, the family of friends. The man had a reverence for family. I knew to listen.

I think these underground fathers simply appear, decade to decade, flowing through the generations. Hardly everywhere, and hardly, to be sure, in enough places, but there. As mystical, sometimes, as fate when fate is sweet.

Sometimes I think that all these men who have swept in and out of my life still couldn't replace a good, warm father. But inasmuch as I've never known a good, warm father, the men who entered my life, who taught me right from wrong, who did things they were not asked to do, have become unforgettable. I know of the cold statistics out there. And yet, the mountain of father-son literature does not haunt me. I've known good black men.

Meanings and Values

1. What are some of the important things that fathers are supposed to teach their sons? Why in Paragraph 1 does Haygood compare a boy without a father to woods without deer?
2. Twice in the essay Haygood mentions "good black men." Why do you think he makes race an issue with this reference?
3. In the beginning of Paragraph 2, Haygood speaks of "heartbreaking statistics tossed about regarding single-parent households. . . ." He says that these figures must be considered, yet he goes on to talk about households such as his, where "good black men" have helped raise children. Why does he mention such statistics if he does not plan to focus on them in the essay?

Expository Techniques

1. What examples does the author present of fatherly acts he experienced while growing up?
2. Would the examples of fatherly acts be sufficient to convince most readers that the writer should not be pitied for the lack of a father in his home? (See "Guide to Terms": Evaluation.)
3. Why does Haygood list several men who had an effect on his life and attitudes? Would his essay have been more effective if he had built it around one representative example of an influential man?

Diction and Vocabulary

1. Why does the writer use the words "gaping hole" to describe his friends' image of his household? Is this a figure of speech? (Guide: Figures of Speech.)
2. How does the word "shamelessly" (Par. 1) help define the image of himself the writer presents to readers? What other words and phrases does he employ to shape his audience's responses to himself?

Read to Write

1. Collaborating: Prepare a list of men (not including your biological or adoptive father) who have had a profound impact on your life. Note also their relationship to you. Share your list with two other students in your class. Compare the roles that these men have had in shaping you into an adult. Write a two-page essay analyzing the similarities and differences between the adult males in your life and those in the lives of your classmates.
2. Considering Audience: Haygood's essay may strike chords in readers who have been raised without a father at home. However, even readers who have had fathers in their daily lives are likely to respond strongly to this essay. Why would both groups of readers understand the points Haygood makes? What similarities exist between children raised with fathers as a daily presence and those without? What are important differences, if any? Consider the varied ways in which readers might react to this essay based on their upbringing. Prepare a short essay explaining the different reactions readers might have to Haygood's essay.

3. Developing an Essay: Haygood mentions his mother briefly in Paragraph 1 of his essay; however, he does not discuss her effect on his life or the expectations he held for her. Make a list of the traditional “teaching” responsibilities of mothers and of fathers. Using these responsibilities as examples, prepare an essay supporting or refuting the notion that one person can take on the roles of both parents.

(Note: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of example are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

Alan Buczynski

Alan Buczynski is a construction worker and a writer who lives in the Detroit area.

Iron Bonding

Newspaper columns, magazine articles, and everyday conversations are often filled with generalities about the different ways men and women behave. This essay looks at the emotional life of men, offering a working person’s perspective rather than that of the intellectuals and professional people often associated with the “men’s movement.” The essay first appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*.

“I just don’t get it.” We were up on the iron, about 120 feet, waiting for the gang below to swing up another beam. Sweat from under Ron’s hard hat dripped on the beam we were sitting on and evaporated immediately, like water thrown on a sauna stove. We were talking about the “men’s movement” and “wildman weekends.”

“I mean,” he continued, “if they want to get dirty and sweat and cuss and pound on things, why don’t they just get real jobs and get paid for it?” Below, the crane growled, the next piece lifting skyward.

I replied: “Nah, Ron, that isn’t the point. They don’t want to sweat every day, just sometimes.”

He said: “Man, if you only sweat when you want to, I don’t call that real sweatin’.”

Although my degree is in English, I am an ironworker by trade; my girlfriend, Patti, is a graduate student in English literature. Like a tennis ball volleyed by two players with distinctly different styles, I am bounced between blue-collar maulers and precise academicians. My conversations range from fishing to Foucault, derricks to deconstruction. There is very little overlap, but when it does occur it is generally the academics who are curious about the working life.

Patti and I were at a dinner party. The question of communication between men had arisen. Becky, the host, is a persistent interrogator: “What do you and Ron talk about?”

I said, “Well, we talk about work, drinking, ah, women.”

Becky asked, “Do you guys ever say, ‘I love you’ to each other?” This smelled mightily of Robert Bly and the men’s movement.

I replied: “Certainly. All the time.”

I am still dissatisfied with this answer. Not because it was a lie, but because it was perceived as one.

The notion prevails that men’s emotional communication skills are less advanced than that of chimpanzees, that we can no more communicate with one another than can earthworms.

Ironworkers as a group may well validate this theory. We are not a very articulate bunch. Most of us have only a basic education. Construction sites are extremely noisy, and much of our communication takes place via hand signals. There is little premium placed on words that don’t stem from our own jargon. Conversations can be blunt.

Bly’s approach, of adapting a fable for instruction, may instinctively mimic the way men communicate. Ironworkers are otherwise very direct, yet when emotional issues arise we speak to one another in allegory and parable. One of my co-workers, Cliff, is a good storyteller, with an understated delivery: “The old man got home one night, drunk, real messed up and got to roughhousing with the cat. Old Smoke, well she laid into him, scratched him good. Out comes the shotgun. The old man loads up, chases Smoke into the front yard and blam! Off goes the gun. My Mom and my sisters and me we’re all screamin’. Smoke comes walkin’ in the side door. Seems the old man blew away the wrong cat, the neighbor’s Siamese. Red lights were flashin’ against the house, fur was splattered all over the lawn, the cops cuffed my old man and he’s hollerin’ and man, I’ll tell you, I was cryin’.”

Now, we didn’t all get up from our beers and go over and hug him. This was a story, not therapy. Cliff is amiable, but tough, more inclined to solving any perceived injustices with his fists than verbal banter, but I don’t need to see him cry to know that he can. He has before, and he can tell a story about it without shame, without any disclaimers about being “just a kid,” and that’s enough for me.

Ron and I have worked together for nine years and are as close as 29 is to 30. We have worked through heat and cold and seen each other injured in the stupidest of accidents. One February we were working inside a plant, erecting steel with a little

crane; it was near the end of the day, and I was tired. I hooked onto a piece and, while still holding the load cable, signaled the operator “up.” My thumb was promptly sucked into the sheave of the crane. I screamed, and the operator came down on the load, releasing my thumb. It hurt. A lot. Water started leaking from my eyes. The gang gathered around while Ron tugged gently at my work glove, everyone curious whether my thumb would come off with the glove or stay on my hand.

“O.K., man, relax, just relax,” Ron said. “See if you can move it.” Ron held my hand. The thumb had a neat crease right down the center, lengthwise. All the capillaries on one side had burst and were turning remarkable colors. My new thumbnail was on back order and would arrive in about five months. I wiggled the thumb, an eighth of an inch, a quarter, a half.

“You’re O.K., man, it’s still yours and it ain’t broke. Let’s go back to work.”

Afterwards, in the bar, while I wrapped my hand around a cold beer to keep the swelling and pain down, Ron hoisted his bottle in a toast: “That,” he said, “was the best scream I ever heard, real authentic, like you were in actual pain, like you were really scared.”

If this wasn’t exactly Wind in His Hair howling eternal friendship for Dances with Wolves, I still understood what Ron was saying. It’s more like a 7-year-old boy putting a frog down the back of a little girl’s dress because he has a crush on her. It’s a backward way of showing affection, of saying “I love you,” but it’s the only way we know. We should have outgrown it, and hordes of men are now paying thousands of dollars to sweat and stink and pound and grieve together to try and do just that. Maybe it works, maybe it doesn’t. But no matter how cryptic, how Byzantine, how weird and weary the way it travels, the message still manages to get through.

Meanings and Values

1. According to the writer, how do men communicate with each other on emotional matters?
2. Buczynski concludes that “no matter how cryptic, how Byzantine, how weird and weary the way it travels, the message still manages to get through” (Par. 19). Does he convince you that this generality is well-founded? Why or why not?

Expository Techniques

1. Identify those places in the essay where the generality being illustrated is stated more or less directly. Would presenting the generality as a thesis statement in the opening paragraphs make the essay more effective? (See “Guide to Terms”: Thesis; Evaluation.)

2. What strategy does the writer use in Paragraphs 1–10 to open the essay? (Guide: Introduction.)

3. Identify the main examples Buczynski uses and then discuss the effectiveness of each. (Guide: Evaluation.)

Diction and Vocabulary

1. Discuss how the simile in the third sentence of the opening paragraph, “like water thrown on a sauna stove,” heightens the contrast between iron workers and people involved in the “men’s movement.” (Guide: Figures of Speech.)

2. Explain how the word choice in Paragraph 5 emphasizes contrasts between academics and blue-collar workers. (Guide: Diction; Emphasis.)

3. If you do not know the meaning of any of the following words, look them up in a dictionary: maulers (Par. 5); interrogator (6); articulate (12); allegory, parable (13); disclaimers (14).

Read to Write

1. Collaborating: Working in a small group, discuss the roles of stories, especially allegories or parables, in communicating emotions within your college environment. How do you, as college students, share emotions? Can you think of particular stories that helped you share such feelings? Has there been a significant event on campus that has generated such stories? Write a list of such events and stories that might be good examples for use in an expository essay about communicating.

2. Considering Audience: How do the communication and self-disclosure examples help this writer to establish an identity? Does the reader need some prior understanding of “blue-collar” workers to understand Buczynski’s

piece? With what other examples of male camaraderie and emotion sharing are Americans familiar? How about examples of female identity building and emotion sharing?

3. Developing an Essay: Using “Iron Bonding” as a model, use examples to create an essay explaining the communication strategies of a particular group of people with which you are familiar. (Note: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of example follow.)

Susan Straight

Susan Straight was born in Riverside, California, in 1960, and she continues to live there. She attended Riverside Community College, the University of Southern California, and the University of Massachusetts—Amherst, from which she received an M.F.A. in 1984. She is currently Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California-Riverside. She is the author of five novels. The most recent, *Highwire Moon* (2001), was a finalist for the National Book Award and received the Commonwealth of California Gold Medal for Fiction. Her other books include *Aquaboogie* (1990), *I Been in Sorrow’s Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots* (1993), *Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights* (1995), and *The Gettin’ Place* (1996). Her essays have appeared in many publications, including the *New York Times*, *Harper’s*, and *Salon*. Her short stories have appeared in *Zoetrope*, *TriQuarterly*, *Story*, *North American Review*, *Ploughshare*, and the *Ontario Review*.

Cartilage

The examples in this essay focus on the blended (or shared) identities of the writer’s circle of friends and her community. At the same time, they present and explore a broader insight into the ways ethnicity and race contribute to the blended identities that often characterize contemporary society and culture. This selection was first published in a collection of essays by contemporary writers entitled *Some of My Best Friends: Writings on Interracial Friendships*.

“Girl, we can’t have the Disco Ball on Saturday before Labor Day,” I said. “Won’t we all be cooking for The Hole?” When everyone looked at me, I added, “We’re the old folks now. Right?”

We are in our early and late forties, and our children and grandchildren milled about outside the community room at the park where we’d gathered to make our plans. Most of us have lived here, in Riverside, California, for all our lives, have known one another since we were children or teens or just-married, and all the women around the table started laughing when I showed my palms to the sky in question of our status. My friend Revia said, “Since last year we are.”

Last Labor Day, we realized that all the aunts and uncles and elders who used to have holiday celebrations in someone’s driveway or yard had passed on or moved away to quieter places. So we took over, barbecuing and cooking side dishes and bringing tables and chairs to this park, to a sunken spot we call The Hole because it’s down the slope of an arroyo and shaded by huge pecan trees.

In the seventies, many white people in this city used to be afraid to drive past this park because black teenagers sometimes threw rocks at pale faces in luxury cars. But now, the neighborhood known as the Eastside, where my husband and many of my friends grew up, is shifting from African-American to Mexican-born, and the whole city is as integrated as our old neighborhoods always were.

Today, the familiar faces I have known nearly all my life, descended from men and women born in Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Georgia, are all around me at this table as we plan fund-raisers for a group formed to keep the old neighborhood alive through dinners and talent shows and community projects.

And me, always the only white person in the room, with blond hair, blue eyes, and black-rimmed glasses instead of the granny specs some of the women in this room teased me for when we were in junior high. Back then, when I met my future husband, his skin red-brown as palm bark, his natural wide enough to frame my face when we stood in front of a mirror, a few of these women gave me a hard time, and I knew to expect it. I knew what they thought of white girls.

In junior high and then high school, I’d watched closely the chameleonlike shifts in clothes, voice, hair, and attitude as people decided how they would transform themselves into who they thought they wanted to be. A few white girls considered themselves Chicanas, and matched their friends’ wire-thin eyebrows, dark lipstick, and babydoll tanks covered with flannel Pendletons. A few black girls were cheerleaders and looked exactly like their white counterparts, with tight ponytails and great posture and matching overalls. A few Chicano guys were black gangsters, and one black guy from my old neighborhood was a vato. Stoners and cholos and letterman jocks—all had uniforms, theme songs, and secret code words

sprinkled in their conversations. They all had their territories on campus, too—the hill, the arcade, the brick wall, and the parking lot.

The white girls who wanted to be black, before the nineties when the word “wigger” came into play, worked very hard, but as I watched, I had the feeling they were going about it all wrong.

They talked as if born in Mississippi. They cornrowed their brown or red hair, and their scalps shone white as mother-of-pearl in the gaps. They snapped their fingers and sat at the right table, but they were never quite comfortable there, because most of the black girls didn't trust them at all.

For good reason. When one of the white girls, upper-middle class, not from my mixed neighborhood or from the Eastside, decided she really wanted to be homecoming queen her senior year, she went right out and got a blond escort from the crosstown rival and wealthier high school. Her hair blow-dried straight, her lipstick pink, she was transformed back into her true self. And she got her butt kicked. Her transformation and betrayal were so obvious and egregious she became legend: to do what she did was called “pulling a Sheila.”

Even then, knowing I'd probably marry my boyfriend, I watched. I was so pale, so blond, and I wished I at least had black hair, darker eyebrows. But having had girlfriends since junior high who'd taught me how to dance in the gym and during PE, who sat patiently with me during class and braided hair and told stories, I thought my caution and observance might help when I knew nothing of my physical appearance would.

He was sixteen, I was fifteen, and on Labor Day in 1976, he brought me to his parents' house, where—no pressure—everyone gathered in the driveway and the living room. About a hundred people, all staring at the little blond girl with a halter dress and nervous smile. One of those white girls, I knew they were thinking.

The aunts, eight of them, stared me down in the living room, but nodded and shook my hand. But his sister and cousins and stepsister and other girls were in the dining room, girls my age who didn't trust me for a minute. They cut their eyes my way, muttered things not quite under their breaths, and elbowed me out of the way after refusing my hand. They sucked their teeth instead, along with a few female neighbors who raised their eyebrows and said, “Mmm, mmm, mmm. What does he think he's doing?”

And what did I think I was doing? How could they not think I was pulling a Sheila? I headed for the kitchen out of instinct. I knew what to do.

My mother is Swiss. I am the oldest of all her children, birth and foster, and I have been cooking and cleaning since I was seven. When my future husband introduced me to his mother, holding court at the stove where she fed not only her own six kids but half the neighborhood, she looked into my face and said graciously, “Let's get you a plate.”

I said, “Can I help you with the dishes?”

She stood near me at the Formica counters and stove the same color as my mother's. I exclaimed over the barbecue and helped her cut the ham and asked how she made monkey bread, her famous circle of rolls. At Thanksgiving, then Christmas, and on Super Bowl Sunday (a family holiday with the same importance as the others), I washed dishes and stayed in the kitchen with the women, who followed my future mother-in-law's noddings and finally accepted me, after a period of intense observation.

And my own mother, who stands four-eleven, looked up at the tall brown boy who came to pick me up and said, “You're on the basketball team?” Anyone who played a sport, and was of reasonable height, was fine with her. He didn't drink, smoke, or do anything to hurt his basketball career, and our first dates consisted of shooting hoops at the playground and then playing tennis at the university courts.

She accepted him without reservation. During our senior year, she came to his basketball games, knitting in the stands a few rows below his father, who sat with cronies in trench coats to conceal their flasks, shouting, “Fall, ball!” whenever his son lofted a shot.

During all those years, I did listen to the same music, and we danced the same dances, and used the same secret code words of the neighborhood. How could we have talked otherwise? But I never cornrowed my hair or pretended that I was not half Swiss. I was always too skinny. I still am.

I have been an honorary Eastsider for twenty-five years now. We all wear jeans or comfortable pants to our many gatherings, and even though I have been divorced for five years, my daughters and I are expected at each and every event. Most of the time, we all wear our hair in buns, because we are at that stage in our lives. We are kind of tired, and we've been cooking all day.

We sit around the table today: Doris and Revia, whose mother was born in Louisiana but has lived at the end of this block for forty-five years. Revia's daughters and nieces, who all call me Auntie. My sister-in-law Tina, and my brother-in-law's girlfriend Shirley, whose father was born in the South and whose mother was born in Mexico. Her tamales and temper are legendary, and though they never married, my children call her Auntie.

The Aunties. That's what we are now, and we have earned the status. We bring one another food when someone is sick or someone has died. We sit companionably and holler at the kids to keep it down.

We direct the younger girls not to walk too far from where we are in the park. And I laugh inside when I watch the rare white teen, girl or boy, try to navigate the hundred-plus people of Labor Day or August Family Reunion. They have the right jackets, carry the proper CDs, and have cornrows or tattoos.

But they don't have stretch marks, knife cuts from disassembling hams and chicken, laugh lines and frown marks from our children and spouses, sore backs from carrying wet laundry, and sore feet from carrying babies and pacing sidelines and grocery lines.

"How did we get to be the old folks?" Shirley asked, laughing and yet a deep furrow between her brows. We were watching teenagers gather around the table in The Hole, irritating us with their loudness and greedy helpings, just the way we used to get on the aunts' nerves.

I shrugged, and Revia did, too.

"'Cause nobody else stepped in."

On Labor Day, our knees met in a companionable semicircle, a crescent grin of white plastic chairs arranged on the slope of the depression under the pecan trees, where we can keep an eye on the food. We are in charge. We brought macaroni and cheese, pineapple upside-down cake, potato salads, and string beans with ham hocks. I brought rice and black-eyed peas and hot sausage, my dish, the one people ask if I am bringing. Along with the scars, you'd better have a dish.

I am still blond and small, and my women friends and sister-in-law and relatives are not, but our arms rest alongside one another's on the chairs' plastic smoothness, and they are all alike. Sun-marked, softer than when we were young, our knuckles bigger, our fingers sore. We talk about our hurts. My feet, Shirley's wrists, Doris's back, and Revia's migraines. A white family shows up, friends of someone's, and their teenage boy stares at me when introductions are made. He has on the right football jersey, the right haircut, the right tattoos. I nod at him, and we watch him get a plate of food with our nephews. He says, "This looks really good. Thank you."

From our vantage point, we raise our brows and smile.

My house is a mile-and-a-half from the park, not on the Eastside. Half of us don't live in the neighborhood anymore, but we gather there and our hearts remain there.

My three daughters have lived in the same house for fourteen years, and they have friends from our neighborhood. Half Mexican, half white. Half Salvadoran, half Polish. Half Saudi, half black.

My girls are Swiss, French, African, Creek, Cherokee, and Irish. They don't judge their friends, or themselves, by music or clothes or hairstyles. They listen to Nickelback and Lenny Kravitz and Santana and the Dixie Chicks. They roll their eyes at their father and me when we play the Bar-Kays and Parliament. They roll their eyes at white teens who cruise by our house in expensive trucks, blaring Jay-Z and Snoop Dogg and shouting, "What up, dog?"

They suck their teeth and say, "Not you," and in their tone, I hear the voices of their actual ancestors and their mother's friends, the women who sit in the circle with me. We know it's all about the scars and pain, the food and laughs, the secret code you can only understand when you've bumped elbows while standing at the stove, when you've sat by the hospital bed while someone you loved was fading away—places where it doesn't matter what you wear or listen to or how your hair looks. It matters that your knees touch while you wait.

Meanings and Values

1. Where in the essay does the writer state a generalization that the examples illustrate and explore? In your own words, state the essay's broader, implied generalization about the roles of race and ethnicity in the construction of contemporary identities.

2. Cartilage refers to strong, elastic connective tissue in humans and other mammals. In what ways is this term an appropriate (or inappropriate) title for the essay?

3. What differences between her adolescent experiences and those of contemporary adolescents does the writer highlight? What similarities does she point out?

Expository Techniques

1. Where in the essay does the writer present extended examples? Where does she present briefer examples? Which examples, if any, seem to fall between brief and extended in length?

2. Choose two examples you consider particularly effective, and explain what you think makes them so effective. (See "Guide to Terms": Evaluation.) Do you think other readers are likely to agree with your evaluation? Why, or why not?

3. What narrative does the writer present at the beginning of the essay and at the end? Discuss the ways in which this narrative acts as an example illustrating the main themes of the essay. Explain how it acts as a "frame" for other examples in the selection.

Diction and Vocabulary

1. Where in the essay does the writer use words or phrases from language other than English? Make a list of these words and phrases, and provide a definition or synonym for each term whose meaning you understand.

2. Is it necessary to understand the meaning of the terms you listed for question 1 in order to understand the passages in which they appear? Why, or why not? (Provide specific examples to support your answer.)

3. What, if anything, do the terms from other languages contribute to the effectiveness of the essay? What do slang expressions contribute? (Guide: Colloquial Expressions.)

Read to Write

1. **Collaborating:** Consider the challenges to building a secure identity that you and your friends faced in high school as well as the strategies you used to develop your identity. Working with a group of fellow students, prepare a list of these challenges and strategies and compare them to the challenges and strategies described in Straight's essay. Are there similarities? Do some experiences seem to cross social, cultural, and economic boundaries to become universal to teens in North America? Which seem unique to particular groups? After you have completed the list as a group, write a short essay of your own on the topic of establishing a personal identity during high school, discussing the challenges you faced and the strategies you employed. Or write an essay exploring the contrasts you discovered among your experiences and those of your classmates.

2. **Considering Audience:** Think about the different groups of people that might read this essay. How do you think teens would react to it? Would they identify with the examples? Would their responses vary according to the neighborhoods where they lived, their ages, the schools they attended, or their ethnic and cultural backgrounds? Would the examples in this piece be effective for a 60-year-old reader, for example? Why, or why not? Are the experiences of such a reader in any way similar to those described in the essay? Put yourself in the role of various readers by writing three 1-paragraph responses to the essay: one from the perspective of an 18-year-old from a rural community, one from the perspective of a 50-year-old raised in the suburbs, and one from the perspective of a 50-year-old living and raised in a large city.

3. **Developing an Essay:** Write an essay describing the culture of your neighborhood. Be sure to provide examples of the different types of people you knew and the different groups of friends that lived there. What did you need to "fit in" the neighborhood? Were there different "requirements" for each group?

(Note: Suggestions for topics requiring development by use of example are on pp. 90–91 at the end of this chapter.)

Writing Suggestions for Chapter 3

Example

Use one of the following statements or another suggested by them as your central theme. Develop it into a unified composition, using examples from history, current events, or personal experience to illustrate your ideas. Be sure to have your reader-audience clearly in mind, as well as your specific purpose for the communication.

1. Successful businesses keep employees at their highest level of competence.
2. In an age of working mothers, fathers spend considerable time and effort helping raise the children.
3. Family life can create considerable stress.
4. Laws holding parents responsible for their children's crimes would (or would not) result in serious injustices.
5. Letting people decide for themselves which laws to obey and which to ignore would result in anarchy.
6. Many people find horror movies entertaining.
7. Service professions are often personally rewarding.
8. Religion in the United States is not dying.
9. Democracy is not always the best form of government.
10. A successful career is worth the sacrifices it requires.
11. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."
12. The general quality of television commercials may be improving (or deteriorating).
13. An expensive car can be a poor investment.
14. "Some books are to be tasted; others swallowed; and some few to be chewed and digested." (Francis Bacon, English scientist-author, 1561–1626)
15. Most people are superstitious in one way or another.
16. Relationships within the family are much more important than relationships outside the family.

Collaborative Exercise

Working in a group, begin with the statement "Many people find horror movies entertaining," and ask each person to identify two examples to illustrate and support the generality advanced in the statement. (This task will probably require each group member to do some research.) After the examples have been collected, group members should present them, and the group as a whole should vote for those that best illustrate the generality. Each group member should then create a short essay using the examples to explain and support the statement. (Statements 7, 10, 12, and 13 also lend themselves well to this activity.)