



Process Analysis



Analysis involves dividing something into its component parts and explaining what they are, on the assumption that it is easier to consider and to understand the subject in smaller segments than in a large, complicated whole (see the chapter “Division and Classification,” [285–327]). To analyze the human body, you could divide it into systems—skeletal, circulatory, respiratory, digestive, neurological—before identifying and defining the components of each. Of the digestive system, for instance, you would discuss the mouth, pharynx, esophagus, stomach, and large and small intestines.

You can analyze a process in the same way, focusing on *how* rather than *what*, that will lead to a particular consequence, product, or result.

A *directive process analysis* identifies the steps in how to make or do something: how to sail a catamaran; how to get to Kuala Lumpur; how to make brownies; how to collaborate in a writing group “to keep a group running smoothly and to forestall some common problems,” as John Trimbur advises in “Guidelines for Collaborating in Groups” (72–73). The Introduction to Chapter 1 (2–12), for instance, explains the general processes embedded in reading and writing essays, poetry, stories, and creative non-fiction. One of the differences between an art and a science is that in the arts even those who follow a similar process will end up with qualitatively

different results. For example, an accomplished singer's or writer's style is so markedly different from that of any other singer or writer that the individual performer is immediately recognized.

An *informative process analysis* can identify the stages by which something is created or formed, or how something is done. In "Those Crazy Ideas" (132–40), Isaac Asimov analyzes two "styles" of scientific investigation by comparing and contrasting the ways in which Charles Darwin (see 335–40) and Alfred Russel Wallace arrived "independently and simultaneously" at the theory of evolution. A process analysis can also explain how something functions or works, as Tom and Ray Magliozzi do in "Inside the Engine" (142–46): "Overfilling [your car oil] is just as bad as underfilling. . . . If you're a quart and a half . . . overfilled, you could have so much oil in the crankcase that the spinning crankshaft is going to hit the oil and turn it into suds. It's impossible for the pump to pump suds, so you'll ruin the motor. It's kind of like a front-loading washing machine that goes berserk and spills suds all over the floor when you put too much detergent in." Or a process analysis can explain the meanings and implications of a concept, system, or mechanism as the basis for a philosophy that incorporates the process in question. Thus in the process of explaining the medical processes involved in a "Code Blue" alert (365–69), Jasmine Innerarity offers not only a philosophy of lifesaving, but a philosophy of life.

A process analysis can incorporate an explanation and appreciation of a way of life, as implied in the photograph of the Mennonite carpenter (126), taken in 1999, but in many respects timeless. Ntozake Shange does this in "What Is It We Really Harvestin' Here?" (166–71). Shange explains how to grow potatoes, mustard greens, and watermelon, and how to cook "Mama's rice"; in the process, she offers a joyous interpretation not only of "'colored' cuisine," but of the people who cultivate, prepare, and eat this nourishment for the soul as well as the body. An analysis can also incorporate a critique of a process, sometimes as a way to advocate an alternative, as Scott Russell Sanders does in showing the deleterious effects of alcoholism on alcoholics' families in "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze" (249–59). Matt Nocton's "Harvest of Gold, Harvest of Shame" (527–31) provides both an overt explanation of a process—how tobacco is harvested—and an implied critique of the exploitation of the migrant workers who do the backbreaking labor. Each worker must "must tie [a burlap sack] around his waist as a source of protection against the dirt and rocks that he will be dragging himself through for the next eight hours."

A process analysis can also embed a critique of the process it discusses. Ning Yu's "Red and Black, or One English Major's Beginning" (173–82) is an explanation of how he learned English from two sources: his father, a sophisticated professor of Chinese language and literature, and the anti-intellectual members of the People's Liberation Army, who expelled (and imprisoned) the intellectuals and took over the schools. Ning analyzes

how the Reds taught: by lecturing and having the middle school pupils memorize verbal “hand grenades”—“Drop your guns! Down with U.S. Imperialism!”—which they didn’t understand. Here Ning criticizes the teachers, the process, and the results: “books were dangerous,” and ignorance prevailed. In contrast, Dr. Yu does it right, beginning with the alphabet, then on to the basics of grammar, and then the reading of short sentences and learning vocabulary, to provide his son with an adequate foundation for genuine reading and understanding—a particularly important heritage while Dr. Yu is imprisoned.

The following suggestions for writing an essay of process analysis are in themselves—you guessed it—a process analysis.

To write about a process, for whatever audience, you first have to *make sure you understand it yourself*. If it’s a process you can perform, such as parallel parking or hitting a good tennis forehand, try it out before you begin to write, and note the steps and possible variations from start to finish.

Early on you’ll need to *identify the purpose or function of the process and its likely outcome*: “How to lose twenty pounds in ten weeks.” Then the steps or stages in the process occur in a given sequence; it’s helpful to *list them in their logical or natural order* and to *provide time markers* so your readers will know what comes first, second, and thereafter. “First, have a physical exam. Next, work out a sensible diet, under medical supervision. Then. . . .”

If the process involves many simultaneous operations, for clarity you may need to *classify all aspects of the process and discuss each one separately*, as you might in explaining the photograph of what the Chinese boy is doing in order to learn to read and write his native language (176). For instance, since playing the violin requires bowing with the right hand and fingering with the left, it makes sense to consider each by itself. After you’ve done this, however, be sure to *indicate how all of the separate elements of the process fit together*. To play the violin successfully, the right hand does indeed have to know what the left hand is doing. If the process you’re discussing is cyclic or circular—as in the life cycle of a plant, or the water cycle, involving evaporation, condensation, and precipitation—start with whatever seems to you most logical or most familiar to your readers.

If you’re using specialized or technical language, *define your terms* unless you’re writing for an audience of experts. You’ll also need to *identify specialized equipment* and *be explicit about whatever techniques and measurements your readers need to know*. For example, an essay on how to throw a pot would need to tell a reader who had never potted what the proper consistency of the clay should be before one begins to wedge it or how to tell when all the air bubbles have been wedged out. But how complicated should an explanation be? The more your reader knows about your subject, the more sophisticated your analysis can be, with less emphasis, if any, on the basics. How thin can the pot’s walls be without collapsing? Does the type of clay (white, red, with or without grog) make any difference? The reverse is true if you’re writing for novices—keep it simple to start with.

If subprocesses are involved in the larger process, you can either *explain these where they would logically come in the sequence* or *consider them in footnotes or an appendix*. You don't want to sidetrack your reader from the main thrust. For instance, if you were to explain the process of Prank Day, an annual ritual at Cal Tech, you might begin with the time by which all seniors have to be out of their residence halls for the day: 8 a.m. You might then follow a typical prank from beginning to end: the selection of a senior's parked car to disassemble; the transportation of its parts to the victim's dorm room; the reassembling of the vehicle; the victim's consternation when he encounters it in his room with the motor running. If the focus is on the process of playing the prank, you probably wouldn't want to give directions on how to disassemble and reassemble the car; to do so would require a hefty manual. But you might want to supplement your discussion with helpful hints on how to pay (or avoid paying) for the damage.

After you've finished your essay, if it explains how to perform a process, ask a friend, preferably one who's unfamiliar with the subject, to try it out. (Even people who know how to tie shoelaces can get all tangled up in murky directions.) She can tell you what's unclear, what needs to be explained more fully—and even point out where you're belaboring the obvious. Ask your reader to tell you how well she understands what you've said. If, by the end, she's still asking you what the fundamental concept is, you'll know you've got to run the paper through your typewriter or computer once again.

Process analysis can serve as a vehicle for explaining personal relationships, as Marilyn Nelson does in the flirtatious poem, "Asparagus" (131). For example, an analysis of the sequential process of performing some activity can serve as the framework for explaining a complicated relationship among the people involved in performing the same process or an analogous one. In such essays the relationship among the participants or the character of the person performing the process is more important than the process itself; whether or not the explanation is sufficient to enable the readers to actually perform the process is beside the point.

Scott Russell Sanders's "The Inheritance of Tools" (148–54) is typical of such writing. Although his father is showing Sanders, as a young child, how to pound nails and to saw, the information is not sufficient in the text, even for such a simple process, to provide clear directions of how to do it. The real point of Sanders's commentary is not instructions in how to use tools, but in the relationship between the tender father and his admiring son. This is analogous to the relationship between Chang-rae Lee and his mother in "Coming Home Again" (156–64), expressed through the processes of playing basketball (his mother was a championship player in Taiwan) and cooking, at which his mother was also an expert. Although their relationship was a powerful force when he was growing up, it intensified during the last year of his mother's life, after Chang-rae had graduated

from college and was living at home, trying to master the cooking as if his mother's life—and his—depended on it. In contrast, even though Ntozake Shange's "What Is It We Really Harvestin' Here?" (166–71) is not intended as a cookbook, her freewheeling recipes offer enough directions on how to prepare the food.

Writing parodies of processes, particularly those that are complicated, mysterious, or done badly—may be the ideal revenge of the novice learner or the person obsessed with or defeated by a process. Parodies such as these may include a critique of the process, a satire of the novice or victim (often the author), or both.

STRATEGIES FOR WRITING— PROCESS ANALYSIS

1. Is the purpose of my essay to provide directions—a step-by-step explanation of how to do or make something? Or is the essay's purpose informative—to explain how something happens or works? Do I know my subject well enough to explain it clearly and accurately?
2. If I'm providing directions, how much does my audience already know about performing the process? Should I start with definitions of basic terms ("sauté," "dado") and explanations of subprocesses, or can I focus on the main process at hand? Should I simplify the process for a naive audience, or are my readers sophisticated enough to understand its complexities? Likewise, if I'm providing an informative explanation, where will I start? How complicated will my explanation become? The assumed expertise of my audience will help determine my answers.
3. Have I presented the process in logical or chronological sequence (first, second, third . . .)? Have I furnished an overview so that my readers will have the outcome (or desired results) and major aspects of the process in mind before they immerse themselves in the particulars of the individual steps?
4. Does my language fit both the subject, however general or technical, and the audience? Do I use technical terms when necessary? Which of these do I need to define or explain for my intended readers?
5. What tone will I use in my essay? A serious or matter-of-fact tone will indicate that I'm treating my subject "straight." An ironic, exaggerated, or understated tone will indicate that I'm treating it humorously.

Marilyn Nelson

Nelson, daughter of an Air Force pilot and a teacher, was born in Cleveland in 1946. Brought up on different military bases, Nelson started writing while still in elementary school. Her college degrees are from the University of California, Davis BA, 1968), the University of Pennsylvania (MA, 1970), and the University of Minnesota (PhD, 1979). She is a widely published poet (as Marilyn Waniek before 1995) whose academic career has been primarily at the University of Connecticut. Recipient of numerous honors and fellowships (including a Guggenheim), in 2002 she was chosen as Connecticut Poet Laureate. *The Homeplace* (1990) honors her family, from Rufus Atwood (slave name "Pomp"), c. 1845–1915, to her father and his dashing, heroic group of black World War II aviators, the Tuskegee Airmen.

Suddenly when I hear airplanes overhead—
 big, silver ones
 whose muscles fill the sky—
 I listen: That sounds like
 someone I know.
 And the sky looks much closer.

Nelson's numerous award-winning books include *The Fields of Praise*, which was a National Book Award finalist and recipient of the 1999 Poets' Prize, and *Carver: A Life in Poems*, which was both a Newbery Honor Book and a Coretta Scott King Honor book. Her work ranges widely, from a rendition of Euripides' play *Hecuba* to several books for children, including *Fortune's Bones: The Manumission Requiem* and *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, both published in 2005. In 2004 she opened her home, Soul Mountain, as a writers' retreat. "When I have time and energy, I make quilts," she says. "'Asparagus' is part of a 'bad marriage' sonnet sequence, influenced by George Meredith's 'Modern Love.'"

Asparagus

He taught me how to slurp asparagus:
 You hold it in your fingers, eat the stem
 by inches to the tender terminus,
 then close your eyes and suck in the sweet gem.
 First, cook it in its own delicious steam,
 sauté breadcrumbs in butter separately,
 combine, eat slowly. As he ate, a gleam
 in his eyes twinkled with such *jeu d'esprit*,
 it made me drunk with longing. In my chair
 amid our laughing, slurping dinner guests,
 I felt as smug as a new billionaire,

5

10

not jealous, not rejected, not depressed,
as almost obscene, almost a debauché,
he slurped asparagus, and winked at me.

from *Rattapallax*

ISAAC ASIMOV

Asimov (1920–1992) said that his talent lay in his ability to “read a dozen dull books and make one interesting book out of them.” He amplified, “I’m on fire to explain, and happiest when it’s something reasonably intricate which I can make clear step by step.” From these motives, Asimov wrote nearly five hundred books, averaging one every six weeks for over thirty-five years. Although Asimov held a doctorate in chemistry from Columbia University (1948), his subjects ranged from astronomy, biology, biochemistry, mathematics, and physics, to history, literature, the Bible, limericks, and a two-volume autobiography. Nevertheless, he is probably best known for his science fiction—stories and novels; “Nightfall” has been called “the best science fiction work of all time.” In 1973 he won both the Hugo and Nebula Awards.

Even before the advent of word processors, Asimov wrote ninety words a minute, up to twelve hours a day, a superhuman pace. His demanding schedule allowed two—and only two—drafts of everything, the first on a typewriter, and in his final years, the second on a computer. He said, “But I have a completely unadorned style. I aim to be accurate and clear—whether for an audience of sci-fi fans or general readers, including children.” Asimov has been praised for being “encyclopedic, witty, with a gift for colorful and illuminating examples and explanations”—qualities apparent in “Those Crazy Ideas.” There he explains the creative processes by which two scientists, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, arrived independently at the theory of evolution. Then he analyzes how they worked to illustrate the common characteristics of the creative process, a combination of education, intelligence, intuition, courage—and luck.

Those Crazy Ideas

- 1 **T**ime and time again I have been asked (and I’m sure others who have, in their time, written science fiction have been asked too): “Where do you get your crazy ideas?”
- 2 Over the years, my answers have sunk from flattered confusion to a shrug and a feeble smile. Actually, I don’t really know, and the lack of knowledge doesn’t really worry me, either, as long as the ideas keep coming.

But then some time ago, a consultant firm in Boston, engaged in a sophisticated space-age project for the government, got in touch with me.

What they needed, it seemed, to bring their project to a successful conclusion were novel suggestions, startling new principles, conceptual breakthroughs. To put it into the nutshell of a well-turned phrase, they needed "crazy ideas."

Unfortunately, they didn't know how to go about getting crazy ideas, but some among them had read my science fiction, so they looked me up in the phone book and called me to ask (in essence), "Dr. Asimov, where do you get your crazy ideas?"

Alas, I still didn't know, but as speculation is my profession, I am perfectly willing to think about the matter and share my thoughts with you.

The question before the house, then, is: How does one go about creating or inventing or dreaming up or stumbling over a new and revolutionary scientific principle?

For instance—to take a deliberately chosen example—how did Darwin come to think of evolution?

To begin with, in 1831, when Charles Darwin was twenty-two, he joined the crew of a ship called the *Beagle*. This ship was making a five-year voyage about the world to explore various coast lines and to increase man's geographical knowledge. Darwin went along as ship's naturalist, to study the forms of life in far-off places.

This he did extensively and well, and upon the return of the *Beagle* Darwin wrote a book about his experiences (published in 1840) which made him famous. In the course of this voyage, numerous observations led him to the conclusion that species of living creatures changed and developed slowly with time; that new species descended from old. This, in itself, was not a new idea. Ancient Greeks had had glimmerings of evolutionary notions. Many scientists before Darwin, including Darwin's own grandfather, had theories of evolution.

The trouble, however, was that no scientist could evolve an explanation for the *why* of evolution. A French naturalist, Jean Baptiste de Lamarck, had suggested in the early 1800s that it came about by a kind of conscious effort or inner drive. A tree-grazing animal, attempting to reach leaves, stretched its neck over the years and transmitted a longer neck to its descendants. The process was repeated with each generation until a giraffe in full glory was formed.

The only trouble was that acquired characteristics are not inherited and this was easily proved. The Lamarckian explanation did not carry conviction.

Charles Darwin, however, had nothing better to suggest after several years of thinking about the problem.

But in 1798, eleven years before Darwin's birth, an English clergyman named Thomas Robert Malthus had written a book entitled *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. In this book Malthus suggested that the human

population always increased faster than the food supply and that the population had to be cut down by either starvation, disease, or war; that these evils were therefore unavoidable.

15 In 1838 Darwin, still puzzling over the problem of the development of species, read Malthus's book. It is hackneyed to say "in a flash" but that, apparently, is how it happened. In a flash, it was clear to Darwin. Not only human beings increased faster than the food supply; all species of living things did. In every case, the surplus population had to be cut down by starvation, by predators, or by disease. Now no two members of any species are exactly alike; each has slight individual variations from the norm. Accepting this fact, which part of the population was cut down?

16 Why—and this was Darwin's breakthrough—those members of the species who were less efficient in the race for food, less adept at fighting off or escaping from predators, less equipped to resist disease, went down.

17 The survivors, generation after generation, were better adapted, on the average, to their environment. The slow changes toward a better fit with the environment accumulated until a new (and more adapted) species had replaced the old. Darwin thus postulated the reason for evolution as being the action of *natural selection*. In fact, the full title of his book is *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. We just call it *The Origin of Species* and miss the full flavor of what it was he did.

18 It was in 1838 that Darwin received this flash and in 1844 that he began writing his book, but he worked on for fourteen years gathering evidence to back up his thesis. He was a methodical perfectionist and no amount of evidence seemed to satisfy him. He always wanted more. His friends read his preliminary manuscripts and urged him to publish. In particular, Charles Lyell (whose book *Principles of Geology*, published in 1830–1833, first convinced scientists of the great age of the earth and thus first showed there was *time* for the slow progress of evolution to take place) warned Darwin that someone would beat him to the punch.

19 While Darwin was working, another and younger English naturalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, was traveling in distant lands. He too found copious evidence to show that evolution took place and he too wanted to find a reason. He did not know that Darwin had already solved the problem.

20 He spent three years puzzling, and then in 1858, he too came across Malthus's book and read it. I am embarrassed to have to become hackneyed again, but in a flash he saw the answer. Unlike Darwin, however, he did not settle down to fourteen years of gathering and arranging evidence.

21 Instead, he grabbed pen and paper and at once wrote up his theory. He finished this in two days.

22 Naturally, he didn't want to rush into print without having his notions checked by competent colleagues, so he decided to send it to some well-known naturalist. To whom? Why, to Charles Darwin. To whom else?

I have often tried to picture Darwin's feeling as he read Wallace's essay which, he afterward stated, expressed matters in almost his own words. He wrote to Lyell that he had been forestalled "with a vengeance."

Darwin might easily have retained full credit. He was well-known and there were many witnesses to the fact that he had been working on his project for a decade and a half. Darwin, however, was a man of the highest integrity. He made no attempt to suppress Wallace. On the contrary, he passed on the essay to others and arranged to have it published along with a similar essay of his own. The year after, Darwin published his book.

Now the reason I chose this case was that here we have two men making one of the greatest discoveries in the history of science independently and simultaneously and under precisely the same stimulus. Does that mean *anyone* could have worked out the theory of natural selection if they had but made a sea voyage and combined that with reading Malthus?

Well, let's see. Here's where the speculation starts.

To begin with, both Darwin and Wallace were thoroughly grounded in natural history. Each had accumulated a vast collection of facts in the field in which they were to make their breakthrough. Surely this is significant.

Now every man in his lifetime collects facts, individual pieces of data, items of information. Let's call these "bits" (as they do, I think, in information theory). The "bits" can be of all varieties: personal memories, girls' phone numbers, baseball players' batting averages, yesterday's weather, the atomic weights of the chemical elements.

Naturally, different men gather different numbers of different varieties of "bits." A person who has collected a larger number than usual of those varieties that are held to be particularly difficult to obtain—say, those involving the sciences and the liberal arts—is considered "educated."

There are two broad ways in which the "bits" can be accumulated. The more common way, nowadays, is to find people who already possess many "bits" and have them transfer those "bits" to your mind in good order and in predigested fashion. Our schools specialize in this transfer of "bits" and those of us who take advantage of them receive a "formal education."

The less common way is to collect "bits" with a minimum amount of live help. They can be obtained from books or out of personal experience. In that case you are "self-educated." (It often happens that "self-educated" is confused with "uneducated." This is an error to be avoided.)

In actual practice, scientific breakthroughs have been initiated by those who were formally educated, as for instance by Nicolaus Copernicus, and by those who were self-educated, as for instance by Michael Faraday.

To be sure, the structure of science has grown more complex over the years and the absorption of the necessary number of "bits" has become more and more difficult without the guidance of someone who has already absorbed them. The self-educated genius is therefore becoming rarer, though he has still not vanished.

34 However, without drawing any distinction according to the manner
in which “bits” have been accumulated, let’s set up the first criterion for
scientific creativity:

35 1) The creative person must possess as many “bits” of information
as possible; i.e., he must be educated.

36 Of course, the accumulation of “bits” is not enough in itself. We have
probably all met people who are intensely educated, but who manage to
be abysmally stupid, nevertheless. They have the “bits,” but the “bits” just
lie there.

37 But what is there one can do with “bits”?

38 Well, one can combine them into groups of two or more. Everyone
does that; it is the principle of the string on the finger. You tell yourself to
remember *a* (to buy bread) when you observe *b* (the string). You enforce a
combination that will not let you forget *a* because *b* is so noticeable.

39 That, of course, is a conscious and artificial combination of “bits.” It is
my feeling that every mind is, more or less unconsciously, continually mak-
ing all sorts of combinations and permutations of “bits,” probably at random.

40 Some minds do this with greater facility than others; some minds
have greater capacity for dredging the combinations out of the unconscious
and becoming consciously aware of them. This results in “new ideas,” in
“novel outlooks.”

41 The ability to combine “bits” with facility and to grow consciously
aware of the new combinations is, I would like to suggest, the measure of
what we call “intelligence.” In this view, it is quite possible to be educated
and yet not intelligent.

42 Obviously, the creative scientist must not only have his “bits” on hand
but he must be able to combine them readily and more or less consciously.
Darwin not only observed data, he also made deductions—clever and far-
reaching deductions—from what he observed. That is, he combined the
“bits” in interesting ways and drew important conclusions.

43 So the second criterion of creativity is:

44 2) The creative person must be able to combine “bits” with facility
and recognize the combinations he has formed; i.e., he must be intelligent.

45 Even forming and recognizing new combinations is insufficient in
itself. Some combinations are important and some are trivial. How do you
tell which are which? There is no question but that a person who cannot
tell them apart must labor under a terrible disadvantage. As he plods after
each possible new idea, he loses time and his life passes uselessly.

46 There is also no question but that there are people who somehow have
the gift of seeing the consequences “in a flash” as Darwin and Wallace did; of
feeling what the end must be without consciously going through every step
of the reasoning. This, I suggest, is the measure of what we call “intuition.”

47 Intuition plays more of a role in some branches of scientific knowledge
than others. Mathematics, for instance, is a deductive science in which, once
certain basic principles are learned, a large number of items of information

become "obvious" as merely consequences of those principles. Most of us, to be sure, lack the intuitive powers to see the "obvious."

To the truly intuitive mind, however, the combination of the few necessary "bits" is at once extraordinarily rich in consequences. Without too much trouble they see them all, including some that have not been seen by their predecessors.¹

It is perhaps for this reason that mathematics and mathematical physics has seen repeated cases of first-rank breakthroughs by youngsters. Evariste Galois evolved group theory at twenty-one. Isaac Newton worked out calculus at twenty-three. Albert Einstein presented the theory of relativity at twenty-six, and so on.

In those branches of science which are more inductive and require larger numbers of "bits" to begin with, the average age of the scientists at the time of the breakthrough is greater. Darwin was twenty-nine at the time of his flash, Wallace was thirty-five.

But in any science, however inductive, intuition is necessary for creativity. So:

3) The creative person must be able to see, with as little delay as possible, the consequences of the new combinations of "bits" which he has formed; i.e., he must be intuitive.

But now let's look at this business of combining "bits" in a little more detail. "Bits" are at varying distances from each other. The more closely related two "bits" are, the more apt one is to be reminded of one by the other and to make the combination. Consequently, a new idea that arises from such a combination is made quickly. It is a "natural consequence" of an older idea, a "corollary." It "obviously follows."

The combination of less related "bits" results in a more startling idea; if for no other reason than that it takes longer for such a combination to be made, so that the new idea is therefore less "obvious." For a scientific breakthrough of the first rank, there must be a combination of "bits" so widely spaced that the random chance of the combination being made is small indeed. (Otherwise, it will be made quickly and be considered but a corollary of some previous idea which will then be considered the "breakthrough.")

But then, it can easily happen that two "bits" sufficiently widely spaced to make a breakthrough by their combination are not present in the same mind. Neither Darwin nor Wallace, for all their education, intelligence, and intuition, possessed the key "bits" necessary to work out the theory of evolution by natural selection. Those "bits" were lying in Malthus's book, and both Darwin and Wallace had to find them there.

To do this, however, they had to read, understand, and appreciate the book. In short, they had to be ready to incorporate other people's "bits" and treat them with all the ease with which they treated their own.

¹ The Swiss mathematician, Leonhard Euler, said that to the true mathematician, it is at once obvious that $e^{\pi i} = -1$.

57 It would hamper creativity, in other words, to emphasize intensity
of education at the expense of broadness. It is bad enough to limit the nature
of the "bits" to the point where the necessary two would not be in the
same mind. It would be fatal to mold a mind to the point where it was
incapable of accepting "foreign bits."

58 I think we ought to revise the first criterion of creativity, then, to read:

59 1) The creative person must possess as many "bits" as possible, falling
into as wide a variety of types as possible; i.e., he must be broadly educated.

60 As the total amount of "bits" to be accumulated increases with the
advance of science, it is becoming more and more difficult to gather
enough "bits" in a wide enough area. Therefore, the practice of "brain-
busting" is coming into popularity; the notion of collecting thinkers into
groups and hoping that they will cross-fertilize one another into startling
new breakthroughs.

61 Under what circumstances could this conceivably work? (After all,
anything that will stimulate creativity is of first importance to humanity.)

62 Well, to begin with, a group of people will have more "bits" on hand
than any member of the group singly since each man is likely to have some
"bits" the others do not possess.

63 However, the increase in "bits" is not in direct proportion to the number
of men, because there is bound to be considerable overlapping. As the
group increases, the smaller and smaller addition of completely new "bits"
introduced by each additional member is quickly outweighed by the added
tensions involved in greater numbers; the longer wait to speak, the greater
likelihood of being interrupted, and so on. It is my (intuitive) guess that
five is as large a number as one can stand in such a conference.

64 Now of the three criteria mentioned so far, I feel (intuitively) that intuition
is the least common. It is more likely that none of the group will be
intuitive than that none will be intelligent or none educated. If no individual
in the group is intuitive, the group as a whole will not be intuitive.
You cannot add non-intuition and form intuition.

65 If one of the group is intuitive, he is almost certain to be intelligent
and educated as well, or he would not have been asked to join the group in
the first place. In short, for a brain-busting group to be creative, it must be
quite small and it must possess at least one creative individual. But in that
case, does that one individual need the group? Well, I'll get back to that later.

66 Why did Darwin work fourteen years gathering evidence for a theory
he himself must have been convinced was correct from the beginning?
Why did Wallace send his manuscript to Darwin first instead of offering it
for publication at once?

67 To me it seems that they must have realized that any new idea is met
by resistance from the general population who, after all, are not creative. The
more radical the new idea, the greater the dislike and distrust it arouses.
The dislike and distrust aroused by a first-class breakthrough are so great
that the author must be prepared for unpleasant consequences (sometimes

for expulsion from the respect of the scientific community; sometimes, in some societies, for death).

Darwin was trying to gather enough evidence to protect himself by convincing others through a sheer flood of reasoning. Wallace wanted to have Darwin on his side before proceeding.

It takes courage to announce the results of your creativity. The greater the creativity, the greater the necessary courage in much more than direct proportion. After all, consider that the more profound the breakthrough, the more solidified the previous opinions; the more "against reason" the new discovery seems, the more against cherished authority.

Usually a man who possesses enough courage to be a scientific genius seems odd. After all, a man who has sufficient courage or irreverence to fly in the face of reason or authority must be odd, if you define "odd" as "being not like most people." And if he is courageous and irreverent in such a colossally big thing, he will certainly be courageous and irreverent in many small things so that being odd in one way, he is apt to be odd in others. In short, he will seem to the non-creative, conforming people about him to be a "crackpot."

So we have the fourth criterion:

4) The creative person must possess courage (and to the general public may, in consequence, seem a crackpot).

As it happens, it is the crackpottery that is most often most noticeable about the creative individual. The eccentric and absent-minded professor is a stock character in fiction; and the phrase "mad scientist" is almost a cliché.

(And be it noted that I am never asked where I get my interesting or effective or clever or fascinating ideas. I am invariably asked where I get my *crazy* ideas.)

Of course, it does not follow that because the creative individual is usually a crackpot, that any crackpot is automatically an unrecognized genius. The chances are low indeed, and failure to recognize that the proposition cannot be so reversed is the cause of a great deal of trouble.

Then, since I believe that combinations of "bits" take place quite at random in the unconscious mind, it follows that it is quite possible that a person may possess all four of the criteria I have mentioned in superabundance and yet may never happen to make the necessary combination. After all, suppose Darwin had never read Malthus. Would he ever have thought of natural selection? What made him pick up the copy? What if someone had come in at the crucial time and interrupted him?

So there is a fifth criterion which I am at a loss to phrase in any other way than this:

5) A creative person must be lucky.

To summarize:

A creative person must be 1) broadly educated, 2) intelligent, 3) intuitive, 4) courageous, and 5) lucky.

140 *Process Analysis*

81 How, then, does one go about encouraging scientific creativity? For
now, more than ever before in man's history, we must; and the need will
grow constantly in the future.

82 Only, it seems to me, by increasing the incidence of the various cri-
teria among the general population.

83 Of the five criteria, number 5 (luck) is out of our hands. We can only
hope; although we must also remember Louis Pasteur's famous statement
that "Luck favors the prepared mind." Presumably, if we have enough of
the four other criteria, we shall find enough of number five as well.

84 Criterion 1 (broad education) is in the hands of our school system.
Many educators are working hard to find ways of increasing the quality
of education among the public. They should be encouraged to continue
doing so.

85 Criterion 2 (intelligence) and 3 (intuition) are inborn and their inci-
dence cannot be increased in the ordinary way. However, they can be more
efficiently recognized and utilized. I would like to see methods devised for
spotting the intelligent and intuitive (particularly the latter) early in life and
treating them with special care. This, too, educators are concerned with.

86 To me, though, it seems that it is criterion 4 (courage) that receives the
least concern, and it is just the one we may most easily be able to handle.
Perhaps it is difficult to make a person more courageous than he is, but that
is not necessary. It would be equally effective to make it sufficient to be less
courageous; to adopt an attitude that creativity is a permissible activity.

87 Does this mean changing society or changing human nature? I don't
think so. I think there are ways of achieving the end that do not involve
massive change of anything, and it is here that brainbusting has its great-
est chance of significance.

88 Suppose we have a group of five that includes one creative individual.
Let's ask again what that individual can receive from the non-creative four.

89 The answer to me, seems to be just this: Permission!

90 They must permit him to create. They must tell him to go ahead and
be a crackpot.²

91 How is this permission to be granted? Can four essentially non-
creative people find it within themselves to grant such permission? Can
the one creative person find it within himself to accept it?

92 I don't know. Here, it seems to me, is where we need experimenta-
tion and perhaps a kind of creative breakthrough about creativity. Once
we learn enough about the whole matter, who knows—I may even find
out where I get those crazy ideas.

² AUTHOR'S NOTE: Always with the provision, of course, that the crackpot creation that results survives the test of hard inspection. Though many of the products of genius seem crackpot at first, very few of the creations that seem crackpot turn out, after all, to be products of genius.

Content

1. How does Asimov define “crazy ideas”? Is he using “crazy idea” as a synonym for a “new and revolutionary scientific principle”? How would Asimov (or you) distinguish between a “crazy idea” and a “crackpot” idea? Or the notion of a “mad scientist”?
2. Compare and contrast the creative processes by which Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace arrived independently at the theory of evolution. How appropriate is it for Asimov to generalize about scientific creativity on the basis of two examples from a particular field?
3. Identify the five qualities Asimov says are necessary for the creative process to operate. Has he covered all the essentials? How important is “luck” (§ 78)? Is the creative process the same in all fields of the arts and sciences? To what extent must the “climate be right” for the creative process to function effectively? What becomes of “crazy ideas” too advanced for their time?

Strategies/Structures/Language

4. Show how Asimov’s essay is an example of inductive reasoning—beginning with evidence, assessing that evidence, and drawing conclusions from it.
5. Asimov uses a conversational tone and vocabulary, as well as two extended narrative examples (of Darwin and Wallace). Would you expect to find such literary techniques in scientific writing? If so, for what kind of audience? (Compare Darwin, “Understanding Natural Selection” [335–40] and Gould, “Evolution as Fact and Theory” [404–11].)
6. Asimov always identifies the scientists to whom he is referring when he first introduces them (Lamarck, § 11; Malthus, § 14; Lyell, § 18). What does this practice reveal about the amount of scientific knowledge Asimov expects his readers to have?

For Writing

7. What does it take to be successful? Identify and define the essential criteria (four or five items) for an outstanding performance in one of the fields or roles below. Illustrate your definition with a detailed example or two from the lives of successful people in that field or role, perhaps people you know:
 - a. Parent or grandparent
 - b. Medicine (doctor, nurse, social worker, medical researcher, therapist)
 - c. Politics, military, and the law (police or military officer, lawyer, elected official, bureaucrat, judge)
 - d. Athletics (player of team or individual sports, coach, referee)
 - e. Education (student, teacher, or administrator)
 - f. The fine arts (painter, sculptor, photographer, musician, dancer, writer, actor, filmmaker)
 - g. Business (self-made man or woman, salesperson, manager, executive, accountant, broker)
 - h. Another profession or occupation of your choice



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

TOM AND RAY MAGLIOZZI

Tom (born 1938) and Ray (born 1947) Magliozzi were born in East Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Tom worked in marketing; Ray was a VISTA volunteer and taught junior high school. In 1973 the brothers opened the Good News garage in Cambridge, which Ray continues to operate while Tom teaches business at Suffolk University. Three years later their career as Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers, began with a local call-in radio show on car repair, “Car Talk,” which has become a favorite on National Public Radio since 1987.

Speaking, as one commentator has observed, “pure Bostonese that sounds a lot like a truck running over vowels,” and with considerable humor, including unrestrained (some say “maniacal”) laughter at their own jokes, the brothers dispense realistic, easy-to-understand advice about how cars work and what to do when they don’t, on the radio; a host of CDs, such as *Maternal Combustion* (2005); and in their book *Car Talk* (1991), in which the following explanation of “Inside the Engine” appears.

Inside the Engine

- 1 **A** customer of ours had an old Thunderbird that he used to drive back and forth to New York to see a girlfriend every other weekend. And every time he made the trip he’d be in the shop the following Monday needing to get something fixed because the car was such a hopeless piece of trash. One Monday he failed to show up and Tom said, “Gee, that’s kind of unusual.” I said jokingly, “Maybe he blew the car up.”
- 2 Well, what happened was that he was on the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut when he noticed that he had to keep the gas pedal all the way to the floor just to go 30 m.p.h., with this big V-8 engine, and he figured something was awry.
- 3 So he pulled into one of those filling stations where they sell gasoline and chocolate-chip cookies and milk. And he asked the attendant to look at the engine and, of course, the guy said, “I can’t help you. All I know is cookies and milk.” But the guy agreed to look anyway since our friend was really desperate. His girlfriend was waiting for him and he needed to know if he was going to make it. Anyway, the guy threw open the hood and jumped back in terror. The engine was glowing red. Somewhere along the line, probably around Hartford, he must have lost all of his motor oil. The engine kept getting hotter and hotter, but like a lot of other things in the car that didn’t work, neither did his oil pressure warning light. As a result, the engine got so heated up that it fused itself together. All the pistons melted, and the cylinder heads deformed, and the pistons fused to the cylinder walls, and the bearings welded themselves to the crankshaft—oh,

it was a terrible sight! When he tried to restart the engine, he just heard a *click, click, click* since the whole thing was seized up tighter than a drum.

That's what can happen in a case of extreme engine neglect. Most of us wouldn't do that, or at least wouldn't do it knowingly. Our friend didn't do it knowingly either, but he learned a valuable lesson. He learned that his girlfriend wouldn't come and get him if his car broke down. Even if he offered her cookies and milk.

The oil is critical to keeping things running since it not only acts as a lubricant, but it also helps to keep the engine cool. What happens is that the oil pump sucks the oil out of what's called the sump (or the crankcase or the oil pan), and it pushes that oil, under pressure, up to all of the parts that need lubrication.

The way the oil works is that it acts as a cushion. The molecules of oil actually separate the moving metal parts from one another so that they don't directly touch; the crankshaft *journals*, or the hard parts of the crankshaft, never touch the soft connecting-rod *bearings* because there's a film of oil between them, forced in there under pressure. From the pump.

It's pretty high pressure too. When the engine is running at highway speed, the oil, at 50 or 60 pounds or more per square inch (or about 4 bars, if you're of the metric persuasion—but let's leave religion out of this), is coursing through the veins of the engine and keeping all these parts at safe, albeit microscopic, distances from each other.

But if there's a lot of dirt in the oil, the dirt particles get embedded in these metal surfaces and gradually the dirt acts as an abrasive and wears away these metal surfaces. And pretty soon the engine is junk.

It's also important that the motor oil be present in sufficient quantity. In nontechnical terms, that means there's got to be enough of it in there. If you have too little oil in your engine, there's not going to be enough of it to go around, and it will get very hot, because four quarts will be doing the work of five, and so forth. When that happens, the oil gets overheated and begins to burn up at a greater than normal rate. Pretty soon, instead of having four quarts, you have three and a half quarts, then three quarts doing the work of five. And then, next thing you know, you're down to two quarts and your engine is glowing red, just like that guy driving to New York, and it's chocolate-chip cookie time.

In order to avoid this, some cars have gauges and some have warning lights; some people call them "idiot lights." Actually, we prefer to reverse it and call them "idiot gauges." I think gauges are bad. When you drive a car—maybe I'm weird about this—I think it's a good idea to look at the road most of the time. And you can't look at the road if you're busy looking at a bunch of gauges. It's the same objection we have to these stupid radios today that have so damn many buttons and slides and digital scanners and so forth that you need a copilot to change stations. Remember when you just turned a knob?

- 11 Not that gauges are bad in and of themselves. I think if you have your choice, what you want is idiot lights—or what we call “genius lights”—and gauges too. It’s nice to have a gauge that you can kind of keep an eye on for an overview of what’s going on. For example, if you know that your engine typically runs at 215 degrees and on this particular day, which is not abnormally hot, it’s running at 220 or 225, you might suspect that something is wrong and get it looked at before your radiator boils over.
- 12 On the other hand, if that gauge was the only thing you had to rely on and you didn’t have a light to alert you when something was going wrong, then you’d look at the thing all the time, especially if your engine had melted on you once. In that case, why don’t you take the bus? Because you’re not going to be a very good driver, spending most of your time looking at the gauges.
- 13 Incidentally, if that oil warning light ever comes on, shut the engine off! We don’t mean that you should shut it off in rush-hour traffic when you’re in the passing lane. Use all necessary caution and get the thing over to the breakdown lane. But don’t think you can limp to the next exit, because you can’t. Spend the money to get towed and you may save the engine.
- 14 It’s a little-known fact that the oil light does *not* signify whether or not you have oil in the engine. The oil warning light is really monitoring the oil *pressure*. Of course, if you have no oil, you’ll have no oil pressure, so the light will be on. But it’s also possible to have plenty of oil and an oil pump that’s not working for one reason or another. In this event, a new pump would fix the problem, but if you were to drive the car (saying, “It must be a bad light, I just checked the oil!”) you’d melt the motor.
- 15 So if the oil warning light comes on, even if you just had an oil change and the oil is right up to the full mark on the dipstick and is nice and clean—don’t drive the car!
- 16 Here’s another piece of useful info. When you turn the key to the “on” position, all the little warning lights *should light up*: the temperature light, the oil light, whatever other lights you may have. Because that is the *test mode* for these lights. If those lights *don’t* light up when you turn the key to the “on” position (just before you turn it all the way to start the car), does that mean you’re out of oil? No. It means that something is wrong with the warning light itself. If the light doesn’t work then, it’s not going to work at all. Like when you need it, for example.
- 17 One more thing about oil: overfilling is just as bad as underfilling. Can you really have too much of a good thing? you ask. Yes. If you’re half a quart or even a quart overfilled, it’s not a big deal, and I wouldn’t be afraid to drive the car under those circumstances. But if you’re a quart and a half or two quarts or more overfilled, you could have so much oil in the crankcase that the spinning crankshaft is going to hit the oil and turn it into suds. It’s impossible for the pump to pump suds, so you’ll ruin the

motor. It's kind of like a front-loading washing machine that goes berserk and spills suds all over the floor when you put too much detergent in. That's what happens to your motor oil when you overfill it.

With all this talk about things that can go wrong, let's not forget that modern engines are pretty incredible. People always say, "You know, the cars of yesteryear were wonderful. They built cars rough and tough and durable in those days."

Horsefeathers.

The cars of yesteryear were nicer to look at because they were very individualistic. They were all different, and some were even beautiful. In fact, when I was a kid, you could tell the year, make, and model of a car from a hundred paces just by looking at the taillights or the grille.

Nowadays, they all look the same. They're like jellybeans on wheels. You can't tell one from the other. But the truth is, they've never made engines as good as they make them today. Think of the abuse they take! None of the cars of yesteryear was capable of going 60 or 70 miles per hour all day long and taking it for 100,000 miles.

Engines of today—and by today I mean from the late '60s on up—are far superior. What makes them superior is not only the design and the metallurgy, but the lubricants. The oil they had thirty years ago was lousy compared to what we have today. There are magic additives and detergents and long-chain polymers and what-have-you that make them able to hold dirt in suspension and to neutralize acids and to lubricate better than oils of the old days.

There aren't too many things that will go wrong, because the engines are made so well and the tolerances are closer. And aside from doing stupid things like running out of oil or failing to heed the warning lights or overfilling the thing, you shouldn't worry.

But here's one word of caution about cars that have timing belts: Lots of cars these days are made with overhead camshafts. The camshaft, which opens the valves, is turned by a gear and gets its power from the crankshaft. Many cars today use a notched rubber *timing belt* to connect the two shafts instead of a chain because it's cheaper and easy to change. And here's the caveat: *if you don't change it and the belt breaks, it can mean swift ruin to the engine.* The pistons can hit the valves and you'll have bent valves and possibly broken pistons.

So you can do many hundreds of dollars' worth of damage by failing to heed the manufacturer's warning about changing the timing belt in a timely manner. No pun intended. For most cars, the timing belt replacement is somewhere between \$100 and \$200. It's not a big deal.

I might add that there are many cars that have rubber timing belts that will *not* cause damage to the engine when they break. But even if you have one of those cars, make sure that you get the belt changed, at the very least, when the manufacturer suggests it. If there's no specific recommendation and you have a car with a rubber belt, we would recommend that

you change it at 60,000 miles. Because even if you don't do damage to the motor when the belt breaks, you're still going to be stuck somewhere, maybe somewhere unpleasant. Maybe even Cleveland! So you want to make sure that you don't fall into that situation.

- 27 Many engines that have rubber timing belts also use the belt to drive the water pump. On these, don't forget to change the water pump when you change the timing belt, because the leading cause of premature belt failure is that the water pump seizes. So if you have a timing belt that drives the water pump, get the water pump out of there at the same time. You don't want to put a belt in and then have the water pump go a month later, because it'll break the new belt and wreck the engine.
- 28 The best way to protect all the other pieces that you can't get to without spending a lot of money is through frequent oil changes. The manufacturers recommend oil changes somewhere between seven and ten thousand miles, depending upon the car. We've always recommended that you change your oil at 3,000 miles. We realize for some people that's a bit of an inconvenience, but look at it as cheap insurance. And change the filter every time too.
- 29 And last but not least, I want to repeat this because it's important: Make sure your warning lights work. The oil pressure and engine temperature warning lights are your engine's lifeline. Check them every day. You should make it as routine as checking to see if your zipper's up. You guys should do it at the same time.
- 30 What you do is, you get into the car, check to see that your zipper's up, and then turn the key on and check to see if your oil pressure and temperature warning lights come on.
- 31 I don't know what women do.
-

Content

1. Does the Magliozzi brothers' explanation of how a car engine works contain sufficient information that readers can understand it? Why or why not? Do the analogies ("veins," ¶ 7; "suds," ¶ 17) help? Would a diagram or diagrams be useful? If so, what should they include?

2. What assumptions do the authors make about their readers' technical knowledge? Why do they provide basic information (such as how oil works in an engine, ¶s 5–9)? How are they able to do this without either offending their readers' intelligence or boring them?

Strategies/Structures/Language

3. Why do the authors begin their explanation of a process with a story—in this case, a cautionary tale of the guy whose beat-up old Thunderbird had a meltdown on the Merritt Parkway?

4. When writing about science and technology, why is it important to define fundamental terms, even terms readers have heard—and used—many times, such as *motor oil* (§s 5–9), *gauges* (or *idiot gauges*, §s 10–12), and *oil warning light* (§s 13–15)?

5. Does the authors' humor help you to understand how an engine works? Most science and technical writing isn't funny. Can you trust the authority of a humorist in general and these humorists in particular?

6. The authors give commands, such as "Don't drive the car!" when the oil warning light is on (§ 15), and "Make sure your warning lights work" (§ 29). Why can they expect readers to react to such commands without being offended?

For Writing

7. Write an essay for a nonspecialized audience explaining how a tool, mechanical object, or more abstract process (about which you know a great deal) works and how to get maximum performance from it. Possible topics include a specific brand and model of car; a piece of exercise equipment; a kitchen implement or power tool; a particular computer, PDA, MP3 player, cell phone, or other common electronic equipment. Use illustrations or diagrams as appropriate, and refer to them in the text of your essay.

8. Authors in the physical or social sciences customarily work in teams, reporting on their collaborative research. In this spirit of this model, pick a topic on which you are an expert (perhaps a sport or game; cooking; working as a waiter, staff member, lifeguard, teacher's aide, or camp counselor). Collaborate with another equally knowledgeable person or team to explain a technical aspect of the topic—a process, strategy, fundamental decision—to a specialized audience in the same field to (1) show them how to do it and (2) convince them to do it according to your instructions. Use appropriate illustrations or diagrams as necessary.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

Sanders (born 1945) grew up in Ohio, earned a PhD in English from Cambridge University in 1971, and has taught ever since at Indiana University. His twenty-five books include fiction, a biography of Audubon, and several essay collections. Among them, *In Limestone Country* (1985), *Staying Put* (1993), *Writing from the Center* (1995), and *Hunting for Hope* (1998) focus on living and writing in the Midwest. "My writing . . . is bound together by a web of questions" concerning "the ways in which human beings come to terms with the practical problems of living on a small planet, in nature . . . and families and towns. . . ."

The elegiac "The Inheritance of Tools" appeared in the award-winning *The Paradise of Bombs* (1987), personal essays mainly about the American

culture of violence. This essay reveals Sanders's concerns, as a writer and as a son, husband, and father, with the inheritance of skills and values through the generations. Here narration is explanation. Sanders shows how tools become not just extensions of the hand and brain, but of the human heart, as the knowledge of how to use and care for them is transmitted from grandfather to father to son to grandchildren. The ways in which people think about tools and use and care for them reflect their values and personalities; "each hammer and level and saw is wrapped in a cloud of knowing."

The Inheritance of Tools

- 1 **A**t just about the hour when my father died, soon after dawn one February morning when ice coated the windows like cataracts, I banged my thumb with a hammer. Naturally I swore at the hammer, the reckless thing, and in the moment of swearing I thought of what my father would say: "If you'd try hitting the nail it would go in a whole lot faster. Don't you know your thumb's not as hard as that hammer?" We both were doing carpentry that day, but far apart. He was building cupboards at my brother's place in Oklahoma; I was at home in Indiana, putting up a wall in the basement to make a bedroom for my daughter. By the time my mother called with news of his death—the long distance wires whittling her voice until it seemed too thin to bear the weight of what she had to say—my thumb was swollen. A week or so later a white scar in the shape of a crescent moon began to show above the cuticle and month by month it rose across the pink sky of my thumbnail. It took the better part of a year for the scar to disappear, and every time I noticed it I thought of my father.
- 2 The hammer had belonged to him, and to his father before him. The three of us have used it to build houses and barns and chicken coops, to upholster chairs and crack walnuts, to make doll furniture and bookshelves and jewelry boxes. The head is scratched and pockmarked, like an old plowshare that has been working rocky fields, and it gives off the sort of dull sheen you see on fast creek water in the shade. It is a finishing hammer, about the weight of a bread loaf, too light, really, for framing walls, too heavy for cabinet work, with a curved claw for pulling nails, a rounded head for pounding, a fluted neck for looks, and a hickory handle for strength.
- 3 The present handle is my third one, bought from a lumberyard in Tennessee, down the road from where my brother and I were helping my father build his retirement house. I broke the previous one by trying to pull sixteen-penny nails out of floor joists—a foolish thing to do with a finishing hammer, as my father pointed out. "You ever hear of a crowbar?" he said. No telling how many handles he and my grandfather had gone through before me. My grandfather used to cut down hickory trees on his farm, saw them into slabs, cure the planks in his hayloft, and carve

handles with a drawknife. The grain in hickory is crooked and knotty, and therefore tough, hard to split, like the grain in the two men who owned this hammer before me.

After proposing marriage to a neighbor girl, my grandfather used this hammer to build a house for his bride on a stretch of river bottom in northern Mississippi. The lumber for the place, like the hickory for the handle, was cut on his own land. By the day of the wedding he had not quite finished the house, and so right after the ceremony he took his wife home and put her to work. My grandmother had worn her Sunday dress for the wedding, with a fringe of lace tacked on around the hem in honor of the occasion. She removed this lace and folded it away before going out to help my grandfather nail siding on the house. "There she was in her good dress," he told me some fifty-odd years after that wedding day, "holding up them long pieces of clapboard while I hammered, and together we got the place covered up before dark." As the family grew to four, six, eight, and eventually thirteen, my grandfather used this hammer to enlarge his house room by room, like a chambered nautilus expanding its shell.

By and by the hammer was passed along to my father. One day he was up on the roof of our pony barn nailing shingles with it, when I stepped out the kitchen door to call him for supper. Before I could yell, something about the sight of him straddling the spine of that roof and swinging the hammer caught my eye and made me hold my tongue. I was five or six years old, and the world's commonplaces were still news to me. He would pull a nail from the pouch at his waist, bring the hammer down, and a moment later the *thunk* of the blow would reach my ears. And that is what had stopped me in my tracks and stilled my tongue, that momentary gap between seeing and hearing the blow. Instead of yelling from the kitchen door, I ran to the barn and climbed two rungs up the ladder—as far as I was allowed to go—and spoke quietly to my father. On our walk to the house he explained that sound takes time to make its way through air. Suddenly the world seemed larger, the air more dense, if sound could be held back like any ordinary traveler.

By the time I started using this hammer, at about the age when I discovered the speed of sound, it already contained houses and mysteries for me. The smooth handle was one my grandfather had made. In those days I needed both hands to swing it. My father would start a nail in a scrap of wood, and I would pound away until I bent it over.

"Looks like you got ahold of some of those rubber nails," he would tell me. "Here, let me see if I can find you some stiff ones." And he would rummage in a drawer until he came up with a fistful of more cooperative nails. "Look at the head," he would tell me. "Don't look at your hands, don't look at the hammer. Just look at the head of that nail and pretty soon you'll learn to hit it square."

Pretty soon I did learn. While he worked in the garage cutting dove-tail joints for a drawer or skinning a deer or tuning an engine, I would

150 *Process Analysis*

hammer nails. I made innocent blocks of wood look like porcupines. He did not talk much in the midst of his tools, but he kept up a nearly ceaseless humming, slipping in and out of a dozen tunes in an afternoon, often running back over the same stretch of melody again and again, as if searching for a way out. When the humming did cease, I knew he was faced with a task requiring great delicacy or concentration, and I took care not to distract him.

9 He kept scraps of wood in a cardboard box—the ends of two-by-fours, slabs of shelving and plywood, odd pieces of molding—and everything in it was fair game. I nailed scraps together to fashion what I called boats or houses, but the results usually bore only faint resemblance to the visions I carried in my head. I would hold up these constructions to show my father, and he would turn them over in his hands admiringly, speculating about what they might be. My cobbled-together guitars might have been alien spaceships, my barns might have been models of Aztec temples, each wooden contraption might have been anything but what I had set out to make.

10 Now and again I would feel the need to have a chunk of wood shaped or shortened before I riddled it with nails, and I would clamp it in a vise and scrape at it with a handsaw. My father would let me lacerate the board until my arm gave out, and then he would wrap his hand around mine and help me finish the cut, showing me how to use my thumb to guide the blade, how to pull back on the saw to keep it from binding, how to let my shoulder do the work.

11 “Don’t force it,” he would say, “just drag it easy and give the teeth a chance to bite.”

12 As the saw teeth bit down, the wood released its smell, each kind with its own fragrance, oak or walnut or cherry or pine—usually pine because it was the softest, easiest for a child to work. No matter how weathered and gray the board, no matter how warped and cracked, inside there was this smell waiting, as of something freshly baked. I gathered every smidgen of sawdust and stored it away in coffee cans, which I kept in a drawer of the workbench. When I did not feel like hammering nails, I would dump my sawdust on the concrete floor of the garage and landscape it into highways and farms and towns, running miniature cars and trucks along miniature roads. Looming as huge as a colossus, my father worked over and around me, now and again bending down to inspect my work, careful not to trample my creations. It was a landscape that smelled dizzily of wood. Even after a bath my skin would carry the smell, and so would my father’s hair, when he lifted me for a bedtime hug.

13 I tell these things not only from memory but also from recent observation, because my own son now turns blocks of wood into nailed porcupines, dumps cans full of sawdust at my feet and sculpts highways on the floor. He learns how to swing a hammer from the elbow instead of the wrist, how

to lay his thumb beside the blade to guide a saw, how to tap a chisel with a wooden mallet, how to mark a hole with an awl before starting a drill bit. My daughter did the same before him, and even now, on the brink of teenage aloofness, she will occasionally drag out my box of wood scraps and carpenter something. So I have seen my apprenticeship to wood and tools reenacted in each of my children, as my father saw his own apprenticeship renewed in me.

The saw I use belonged to him, as did my level and both of my squares, and all four tools had belonged to his father. The blade of the saw is the bluish color of gun barrels, and the maple handle, dark from the sweat of hands, is inscribed with curving leaf designs. The level is a shaft of walnut two feet long, edged with brass and pierced by three round windows in which air bubbles float in oil-filled tubes of glass. The middle window serves for testing if a surface is horizontal, the others for testing if a surface is plumb or vertical. My grandfather used to carry this level on the gun rack behind the seat in his pickup, and when I rode with him I would turn around to watch the bubbles dance. The larger of the two squares is called a framing square, a flat steel elbow, so beat up and tarnished you can barely make out the rows of numbers that show how to figure the cuts on rafters. The smaller one is called a try square, for marking right angles, with a blued steel blade for the shank and a brass-faced block of cherry for the head.

I was taught early on that a saw is not to be used apart from a square: "If you're going to cut a piece of wood," my father insisted, "you owe it to the tree to cut it straight."

Long before studying geometry, I learned there is a mystical virtue in right angles. There is an unspoken morality in seeking the level and the plumb. A house will stand, a table will bear weight, the sides of a box will hold together, only if the joints are square and the members upright. When the bubble is lined up between two marks etched in the glass tube of a level, you have aligned yourself with the forces that hold the universe together. When you miter the corners of a picture frame each angle must be exactly forty-five degrees, as they are in the perfect triangles of Pythagoras, not a degree more or less. Otherwise the frame will hang crookedly, as if ashamed of itself and of its maker. No matter if the joints you are cutting do not show. Even if you are butting two pieces of wood together inside a cabinet, where no one except a wrecking crew will ever see them, you must take pains to ensure that the ends are square and the studs are plumb.

I took pains over the wall I was building on the day my father died. Not long after that wall was finished—paneled with tongue-and-groove boards of yellow pine, the nail holes filled with putty and the wood all stained and sealed—I came close to wrecking it one afternoon when my daughter ran howling up the stairs to announce that her gerbils had escaped from their cage and were hiding in my brand new wall. She could hear them scratching and squeaking behind her bed. Impossible! I said. How on earth

could they get inside my drum-tight wall? Through the heating vent, she answered. I went downstairs, pressed my ear to the honey-colored wood, and heard the *scritch scritch* of tiny feet.

18 "What can we do?" my daughter wailed. "They'll starve to death, they'll die of thirst, they'll suffocate."

19 "Hold on," I soothed. "I'll think of something."

20 While I thought and she fretted, the radio on her bedside table delivered us the headlines: Several thousand people had died in a city in India from a poisonous cloud that had leaked overnight from a chemical plant. A nuclear-powered submarine had been launched. Rioting continued in South Africa. An airplane had been hijacked in the Mediterranean. Authorities calculated that several thousand homeless people slept on the streets within sight of the Washington Monument. I felt my usual helplessness in the face of all these calamities. But here was my daughter, weeping because her gerbils were holed up in a wall. This calamity I could handle.

21 "Don't worry," I told her. "We'll set food and water by the heating vent and lure them out. And if that doesn't do the trick, I'll tear the wall apart until we find them."

22 She stopped crying and gazed at me. "You'd really tear it apart? Just for my gerbils? The *wall*?" Astonishment slowed her down only for a second, however, before she ran to the workbench and began tugging at drawers, saying, "Let's see, what'll we need? Crowbar. Hammer. Chisels. I hope we don't have to use them—but just in case."

23 We didn't need the wrecking tools. I never had to assault my handsome wall, because the gerbils eventually came out to nibble at a dish of popcorn. But for several hours I studied the tongue-and-groove skin I had nailed up on the day of my father's death, considering where to begin prying. There were no gaps in that wall, no crooked joints.

24 I had botched a great many pieces of wood before I mastered the right angle with a saw, botched even more before I learned to miter a joint. The knowledge of these things resides in my hands and eyes and the web-work of muscles, not in the tools. There are machines for sale—powered miter boxes and radial-arm saws, for instance—that will enable any casual soul to cut proper angles in boards. The skill is invested in the gadget instead of the person who uses it, and this is what distinguishes a machine from a tool. If I had to earn my keep by making furniture or building houses, I suppose I would buy powered saws and pneumatic nailers; the need for speed would drive me to it. But since I carpenter only for my own pleasure or to help neighbors or to remake the house around the ears of my family, I stick with hand tools. Most of the ones I own were given to me by my father, who also taught me how to wield them. The tools in my workbench are a double inheritance, for each hammer and level and saw is wrapped in a cloud of knowing.

25 All of these tools are a pleasure to look at and to hold. Merchants would never paste NEW NEW NEW! signs on them in stores. Their designs

are old because they work, because they serve their purpose well. Like folk songs and aphorisms and the grainy bits of language, these tools have been pared down to essentials. I look at my claw hammer, the distillation of a hundred generations of carpenters, and consider that it holds up well beside those other classics—Greek vases, Gregorian chants, *Don Quixote*, barbed fish hooks, candles, spoons. Knowledge of hammering stretches back to the earliest humans who squatted beside fires, chipping flints. Anthropologists have a lovely name for those unworked rocks that served as the earliest hammers. “Dawn stones,” they are called. Their only qualification for the work, aside from hardness, is that they fit the hand. Our ancestors used them for grinding corn, tapping awls, smashing bones. From dawn stones to this claw hammer is a great leap in time, but no great distance in design or imagination.

On that iced-over February morning when I smashed my thumb with the hammer, I was down in the basement framing the wall that my daughter’s gerbils would later hide in. I was thinking of my father, as I always did whenever I built anything, thinking how he would have gone about the work, hearing in memory what he would have said about the wisdom of hitting the nail instead of my thumb. I had the studs and plates nailed together all square and trim, and was lifting the wall into place when the phone rang upstairs. My wife answered, and in a moment she came to the basement door and called down softly to me. The stillness in her voice made me drop the framed wall and hurry upstairs. She told me my father was dead. Then I heard the details over the phone from my mother. Building a set of cupboards for my brother in Oklahoma, he had knocked off work early the previous afternoon because of cramps in his stomach. Early this morning, on his way into the kitchen of my brother’s trailer, maybe going for a glass of water, so early that no one else was awake, he slumped down on the linoleum and his heart quit.

For several hours I paced around inside my house, upstairs and down, in and out of every room, looking for the right door to open and knowing there was no such door. My wife and children followed me and wrapped me in arms and backed away again, circling and staring as if I were on fire. Where was the door, the door, the door? I kept wondering. My smashed thumb turned purple and throbbled, making me furious. I wanted to cut it off and rush outside and scrape away at the snow and hack a hole in the frozen earth and bury the shameful thing.

I went down into the basement, opened a drawer in my workbench, and stared at the ranks of chisels and knives. Oiled and sharp, as my father would have kept them, they gleamed at me like teeth. I took up a clasp knife, pried out the longest blade, and tested the edge on the hair of my forearm. A tuft came away cleanly, and I saw my father testing the sharpness of tools on his own skin, the blades of axes and knives and gouges and hoes, saw the red hair shaved off in patches from his arms and

the backs of his hands. “That will cut bear,” he would say. He never cut a bear with his blades, now my blades, but he cut deer, dirt, wood. I closed the knife and put it away. Then I took up the hammer and went back to work on my daughter’s wall, snugging the bottom plate against a chalk line on the floor, shimming the top plate against the joists overhead, plumbing the studs with my level, making sure before I drove the first nail that every line was square and true.

Content

1. Sanders characterizes his father, and grandfather, and himself by showing how they used tools and transmitted this knowledge to their children. What characteristics do they have in common? Why does he omit any differences they might have, focusing on their similarities?
2. Sanders distinguishes between a machine and a tool, saying “The skill is invested in the gadget instead of the person who uses it” (§ 24). Why does he favor tools over machines? Do you agree with his definition? With his preference?

Strategies/Structures/Language

3. What is the point of this essay? Why does Sanders begin and end with the relation between banging his thumb with a hammer and his father’s death?
4. Why does Sanders include the vignette of his daughter and her gerbils, which escaped inside the “drum-tight wall” he had just built (§s 17–23)? Would he really have wrecked the wall to get the gerbils out?
5. For what audience is Sanders writing? Does it matter whether or not his readers know how to use tools?
6. Show, through specific examples, how Sanders’s language and quotations of his father’s advice fits his subject, tools, and the people who use them. Consider phrases such as “ice coated the windows like cataracts” (§ 1) and “making sure before I drove the first nail that every line was square and true” (§ 28).

For Writing

7. Sanders defines the “inheritance” of tools as, “So I have seen my apprenticeship to wood and tools reenacted in each of my children, as my father saw his own apprenticeship renewed in me” (§ 13). Tell the story of your own apprenticeship with a tool or collection of tools (kitchen utensils, art supplies, a sewing machine, computer, skis, or other equipment). The explanation of your increasing skill in learning to use it should be intertwined with your relationship with the person who taught you how to use it (not necessarily a family member) and the manner of the teaching—and of the learning. How many generations of teachers and learners does your inheritance involve? If you have taught others how to use it, incorporate this as well.
8. Sanders’s father is the central figure in two essays in *The Essay Connection*, “The Inheritance of Tools” and “Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father’s Booze” (249–59). Each uses a series of stories, narratives, to characterize this significant figure in Sanders’s life, yet the father of “Inheritance” is a very different character

from the father in “Under the Influence.” Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Sanders’s portraits of his father to show the different ways of presenting the same person. Or—for an audience who doesn’t know your subject—write a portrait of someone you know well, or of a public figure you know a great deal about. Use stories to present two or more significant—perhaps contradictory—sides of the same person.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

CHANG-RAE LEE

Lee was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1965 and emigrated to the United States when he was three with his physician father and his mother, who—as “Coming Home Again” reveals—had been a championship basketball player in Korea. After leaving home in Syracuse, New York, to attend Phillips Exeter Academy, he attended Yale (BA 1987) and earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of Oregon (1993), where he taught before becoming affiliated with Hunter College and the Humanities Council and creative writing program at Princeton University (2002–). His first novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), received numerous awards. Its arresting beginning signals many of the motifs of Lee’s work about “the plasticity of identity.” As the novel opens, the central character’s wife has decided to leave the marriage and as she goes calls her husband a “surreptitious/B+ student of life . . . /illegal alien/emotional alien/genre bug/Yellow peril: neo-American . . . stranger/follower/traitor/spy.” As fellow author Jeff Yang explains, “All Asian-American stories, ultimately, are biocryptography—not fiction, not nonfiction, but *un-fiction*, coded answers to the question, ‘Who am I?’” Lee has also published two other highly praised novels. *A Gesture Life* (1999) is derived from his research on the grim lives of Korean “comfort women,” who were forced to supply sex to Japanese soldiers during World War II. In a departure from Lee’s earlier Asian and Asian-American focus, the central character of *Aloft* (2004) is a middle-aged Italian-American Long Island retiree.

“Coming Home Again,” originally published in *The New Yorker* (1996), describes a number of processes in action: the processes of cooking and eating delicious Korean foods, the gradual process of immigrant assimilation into American culture and Lee’s own assimilation into his new school, the son’s maturation process in contrast to his mother’s gradual deterioration from illness, and the process of the father’s and son’s grief after his mother’s death. As a consequence of examining all these processes, “Coming Home Again” provides a poignant and memorable definition of what it means to be a family, of any ethnicity, any place, any time.

Coming Home Again

1 **W**hen my mother began using the electronic pump that fed her liquids and medication, we moved her to the family room. The bedroom she shared with my father was upstairs, and it was impossible to carry the machine up and down all day and night. The pump itself was attached to a metal stand on casters, and she pulled it along wherever she went. From anywhere in the house, you could hear the sound of the wheels clicking out a steady time over the grout lines of the slate-tiled foyer, her main thoroughfare to the bathroom and the kitchen. Sometimes you would hear her halt after only a few steps, to catch her breath or steady her balance, and whatever you were doing was instantly suspended by a pall of silence.

2 I was usually in the kitchen, preparing lunch or dinner, poised over the butcher block with her favorite chef's knife in my hand and her old yellow apron slung around my neck. I'd be breathless in the sudden quiet, and, having ceased my mincing and chopping, would stare blankly at the brushed sheen of the blade. Eventually, she would clear her throat or call out to say she was fine, then begin to move again, starting her rhythmic *ka-jug*; and only then could I go on with my cooking, the world of our house turning once more, wheeling through the black.

3 I wasn't cooking for my mother but for the rest of us. When she first moved downstairs she was still eating, though scantily, more just to taste what we were having than from any genuine desire for food. The point was simply to sit together at the kitchen table and array ourselves like a family again. My mother would gently set herself down in her customary chair near the stove. I sat across from her, my father and sister to my left and right, and crammed in the center was all the food I had made—a spicy codfish stew, say, or a casserole of gingery beef, dishes that in my youth she had prepared for us a hundred times.

4 It had been ten years since we'd all lived together in the house, which at fifteen I had left to attend boarding school in New Hampshire. My mother would sometimes point this out, by speaking of our present time as being "just like before Exeter," which surprised me, given how proud she always was that I was a graduate of the school.

5 My going to such a place was part of my mother's not so secret plan to change my character, which she worried was becoming too much like hers. I was clever and able enough, but without outside pressure I was readily given to sloth and vanity. The famous school—which none of us knew the first thing about—would prove my mettle. She was right, of course, and while I was there I would falter more than a few times, academically and otherwise. But I never thought that my leaving home then would ever be a problem for her, a private quarrel she would have even as her life waned.

6 Now her house was full again. My sister had just resigned from her job in New York City, and my father, who typically saw his psychiatric patients



What is the relationship among the people in this picture? What clues tell you this is a family? Why do you assume they're eating at home? Do you assume they all live together? What clues are there concerning where this family lives? What indications of their social or economic status are present? To what ethnic or national group do they belong? In what ways would this photograph be a good illustration of Chang-rae Lee's "Coming Home Again"? If you were writing a story about this family, what would its plot be?

until eight or nine in the evening, was appearing in the driveway at four-thirty. I had been living at home for nearly a year and was in the final push of work on what would prove a dismal failure of a novel. When I wasn't struggling over my prose, I kept occupied with the things she usually did—the daily errands, the grocery shopping, the vacuuming and the cleaning, and, of course, all the cooking.

When I was six or seven years old, I used to watch my mother as she prepared our favorite meals. It was one of my daily pleasures. She shooed me away in the beginning, telling me that the kitchen wasn't my place, and adding, in her half-proud, half-deprecating way, that her kind of work would only serve to weaken me. "Go out and play with your friends," she'd snap in Korean, "or better yet, do your reading and homework." She knew that I had already done both, and that as the evening approached there was no place to go save her small and tidy kitchen, from which the clatter of her mixing bowls and pans would ring through the house.

I would enter the kitchen quietly and stand beside her, my chin lodging upon the point of her hip. Peering through the crook of her arm, I beheld the movements of her hands. For *kalbi*, she would take up a butchered

short rib in her narrow hand, the flinty bone shaped like a section of an airplane wing and deeply embedded in gristle and flesh, and with the point of her knife cut so that the bone fell away, though not completely, leaving it connected to the meat by the barest opaque layer of tendon. Then she methodically butterflied the flesh, cutting and unfolding, repeating the action until the meat lay out on her board, glistening and ready for seasoning. She scored it diagonally, then sifted sugar into the crevices with her pinched fingers, gently rubbing in the crystals. The sugar would tenderize as well as sweeten the meat. She did this with each rib, and then set them all aside in a large shallow bowl. She minced a half-dozen cloves of garlic, a stub of gingerroot, sliced up a few scallions, and spread it all over the meat. She wiped her hands and took out a bottle of sesame oil, and, after pausing for a moment, streamed the dark oil in two swift circles around the bowl. After adding a few splashes of soy sauce, she thrust her hands in and kneaded the flesh, careful not to dislodge the bones. I asked her why it mattered that they remain connected. "The meat needs the bone nearby," she said, "to borrow its richness." She wiped her hands clean of the marinade, except for her little finger, which she would flick with her tongue from time to time, because she knew that the flavor of a good dish developed not at once but in stages.

9 Whenever I cook, I find myself working just as she would, readying the ingredients—a mash of garlic, a julienne of red peppers, fantails of shrimp—and piling them in little mounds about the cutting surface. My mother never left me any recipes, but this is how I learned to make her food, each dish coming not from a list or a card but from the aromatic spread of a board.

10 I've always thought it was particularly cruel that the cancer was in her stomach, and that for a long time at the end she couldn't eat. The last meal I made for her was on New Year's Eve, 1990. My sister suggested that instead of a rib roast or a bird, or the usual overflow of Korean food, we make all sorts of finger dishes that our mother might fancy and pick at.

11 We set the meal out on the glass coffee table in the family room. I prepared a tray of smoked-salmon canapés, fried some Korean bean cakes, and made a few other dishes I thought she might enjoy. My sister supervised me, arranging the platters, and then with some pomp carried each dish in to our parents. Finally, I brought out a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. My mother had moved to the sofa and was sitting up, surveying the low table. "It looks pretty nice," she said. "I think I'm feeling hungry."

12 This made us all feel good, especially me, for I couldn't remember the last time she had felt any hunger or had eaten something I cooked. We began to eat. My mother picked up a piece of salmon toast and took a tiny corner in her mouth. She rolled it around for a moment and then pushed it out with the tip of her tongue, letting it fall back onto her plate. She swallowed hard, as if to quell a gag, then glanced up to see if we had noticed. Of course we all had. She attempted a bean cake, some cheese, and then a slice of fruit, but nothing was any use.

She nodded at me anyway, and said, "Oh, it's very good." But I was
already feeling lost and I put down my plate abruptly, nearly shattering it
on the thick glass. There was an ugly pause before my father asked me in
a weary, gentle voice if anything was wrong, and I answered that it was
nothing, it was the last night of a long year, and we were together, and I
was simply relieved. At midnight, I poured out glasses of champagne, even
one for my mother, who took a deep sip. Her manner grew playful and
light, and I helped her shuffle to her mattress, and she lay down in the
place where in a brief week she was dead. 13

My mother could whip up most anything, but during our first years of liv-
ing in this country we ate only Korean foods. At my harangue-like behest,
my mother set herself to learning how to cook exotic American dishes.
Luckily, a kind neighbor, Mrs. Churchill, a tall florid young woman with
flaxen hair, taught my mother her most trusted recipes. Mrs. Churchill's
two young sons, palish, weepy boys with identical crew cuts, always ac-
companied her, and though I liked them well enough, I would slip away
from them after a few minutes, for I knew that the real action would be in
the kitchen, where their mother was playing guide. Mrs. Churchill hailed
from the state of Maine, where the finest Swedish meatballs and tuna
casserole and angel food cake in America are made. She readily demon-
strated certain techniques—how to layer wet sheets of pasta for a lasagna
or whisk up a simple roux, for example. She often brought gift shoeboxes
containing curious ingredients like dried oregano, instant yeast, and cream
of mushroom soup. The two women, though at ease and jolly with each
other, had difficulty communicating, and this was made worse by the often
confusing terminology of Western cuisine ("corned beef," "deviled eggs").
Although I was just learning the language myself, I'd gladly play the inter-
locutor, jumping back and forth between their places at the counter, dip-
ping my fingers into whatever sauce lay about. 14

I was an insistent child, and, being my mother's firstborn, much too
prized. My mother could say no to me, and did often enough, but anyone
who knew us—particularly my father and sister—could tell how much
the denying pained her. And if I was overconscious of her indulgence
even then, and suffered the rushing pangs of guilt that she could inflict
upon me with the slightest wounded turn of her lip, I was too happily ob-
tuse and venal to let her cease. She reminded me daily that I was her sole
son, her reason for living, and that if she were to lose me, in either body
or spirit, she wished that God would mercifully smite her, strike her down
like a weak branch. 15

In the traditional fashion, she was the house accountant, the maid,
the launderer, the disciplinarian, the driver, the secretary, and, of course, the
cook. She was also my first basketball coach. In South Korea, where girls'
high school basketball is a popular spectator sport, she had been a star, the
point guard for the national high school team that once won the all-Asia 16

championships. I learned this one Saturday during the summer, when I asked my father if he would go down to the schoolyard and shoot some baskets with me. I had just finished the fifth grade, and wanted desperately to make the middle school team the coming fall. He called for my mother and sister to come along. When we arrived, my sister immediately ran off to the swings, and I recall being annoyed that my mother wasn't following her. I dribbled clumsily around the key, on the verge of losing control of the ball, and flung a flat shot that caromed wildly off the rim. The ball bounced to my father, who took a few not so graceful dribbles and made an easy layup. He dribbled out and then drove to the hoop for a layup on the other side. He rebounded his shot and passed the ball to my mother, who had been watching us from the foul line. She turned from the basket and began heading the other way.

17 "Um-mah," I cried at her, my exasperation already bubbling over, "the basket's over *here!*"

18 After a few steps she turned around, and from where the professional three-point line must be now, she effortlessly flipped the ball up in a two-handed set shot, its flight truer and higher than I'd witnessed from any boy or man. The ball arced cleanly into the hoop, stiffly popping the chain-link net. All afternoon, she rained in shot after shot, as my father and I scrambled after her.

19 When we got home from the playground, my mother showed me the photograph album of her team's championship run. For years I kept it in my room, on the same shelf that housed the scrapbooks I made of basketball stars, with magazine clippings of slick players like Bubbles Hawkins and Pistol Pete and George (the Iceman) Gervin.

20 It puzzled me how much she considered her own history to be immaterial, and if she never patently diminished herself, she was able to finesse a kind of self-removal by speaking of my father whenever she could. She zealously recounted his excellence as a student in medical school and reminded me, each night before I started my homework, of how hard he drove himself in his work to make a life for us. She said that because of his Asian face and imperfect English, he was "working two times the American doctors." I knew that she was building him up, buttressing him with both genuine admiration and her own brand of anxious braggadocio, and that her overarching concern was that I might fail to see him as she wished me to—in the most dawning light, his pose steadfast and solitary.

21 In the years before I left for Exeter, I became weary of her oft-repeated accounts of my father's success. I was a teenager, and so ever inclined to be dismissive and bitter toward anything that had to do with family and home. Often enough, my mother was the object of my derision. Suddenly, her life seemed so small to me. She was there, and sometimes, I thought, *always* there, as if she were confined to the four walls of our house. I would even complain about her cooking. Mostly, though, I was getting more and more impatient with the difficulty she encountered in doing everyday things. I was afraid for her. One day, we got into a terrible argument when

she asked me to call the bank, to question a discrepancy she had discovered in the monthly statement. I asked her why she couldn't call herself. I was stupid and brutal, and I knew exactly how to wound her.

"Whom do I talk to?" she said. She would mostly speak to me in Korean, and I would answer in English.

"The bank manager, who else?" 23

"What do I say?" 24

"Whatever you want to say." 25

"Don't speak to me like that!" she cried. 26

"It's just that you should be able to do it yourself," I said. 27

"You know how I feel about this!" 28

"Well, maybe then you should consider it *practice*," I answered lightly, using the Korean word to make sure she understood. 29

Her face blanched, and her neck suddenly became rigid, as if I were throttling her. She nearly struck me right then, but instead she bit her lip and ran upstairs. I followed her, pleading for forgiveness at her door. But it was the one time in our life that I couldn't convince her, melt her resolve with the blandishments of a spoiled son. 30

When my mother was feeling strong enough, or was in particularly good spirits, she would roll her machine into the kitchen and sit at the table and watch me work. She wore pajamas day and night, mostly old pairs of mine. 31

She said, "I can't tell, what are you making?" 32

"*Mahn-doo* filling." 33

"You didn't salt the cabbage and squash." 34

"Was I supposed to?" 35

"Of course. Look, it's too wet. Now the skins will get soggy before you can fry them." 36

"What should I do?" 37

"It's too late. Maybe it'll be OK if you work quickly. Why didn't you ask me?" 38

"You were finally sleeping." 39

"You should have woken me." 40

"No way." 41

She sighed, as deeply as her weary lungs would allow. 42

"I don't know how you were going to make it without me." 43

"I don't know, either. I'll remember the salt next time." 44

"You better. And not too much." 45

We often talked like this, our tone decidedly matter-of-fact, chin up, just this side of being able to bear it. Once, while inspecting a potato fritter batter I was making, she asked me if she had ever done anything that I wished she hadn't done. I thought for a moment, and told her no. In the next breath, she wondered aloud if it was right of her to have let me go to Exeter, to live away from the house while I was so young. She tested the batter's thickness with her finger and called for more flour. Then she asked if, given a choice, I would go to Exeter again. 46

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47 I wasn't sure what she was getting at, and I told her that I couldn't
be certain, but probably yes, I would. She snorted at this and said it was
my leaving home that had once so troubled our relationship. "Remember
how I had so much difficulty talking to you? Remember?"

48 She believed back then that I had found her more and more ignorant
each time I came home. She said she never blamed me, for this was the
way she knew it would be with my wonderful new education. Nothing I
could say seemed to quell the notion. But I knew that the problem wasn't
simply the *education*; the first time I saw her again after starting school,
barely six weeks later, when she and my father visited me on Parents Day,
she had already grown nervous and distant. After the usual campus events,
we had gone to the motel where they were staying in a nearby town and
sat on the beds in our room. She seemed to sneak looks at me, as though
I might discover a horrible new truth if our eyes should meet.

49 My own secret feeling was that I had missed my parents greatly, my
mother especially, and much more than I had anticipated. I couldn't tell
them that these first weeks were a mere blur to me, that I felt completely
overwhelmed by all the studies and my much brighter friends and the
thousand irritating details of living alone, and that I had really learned
nothing, save perhaps how to put on a necktie while sprinting to class. I felt
as if I had plunged too deep into the world, which, to my great horror, was
much larger than I had ever imagined.

50 I welcomed the lull of the motel room. My father and I had nearly
dozed off when my mother jumped up excitedly, murmured how stupid
she was, and hurried to the closet by the door. She pulled out our old metal
cooler and dragged it between the beds. She lifted the top and began un-
packing plastic containers, and I thought she would never stop. One after
the other they came out, each with a dish that traveled well—a salted
stewed meat, rolls of Korean-style sushi. I opened a container of radish
kimchi and suddenly the room bloomed with its odor, and I reveled in the
very peculiar sensation (which perhaps only true kimchi lovers know) of
simultaneously drooling and gagging as I breathed it all in. For the next
few minutes, they watched me eat. I'm not certain that I was even hungry.
But after weeks of pork parmigiana and chicken patties and wax beans, I
suddenly realized that I had lost all the savor in my life. And it seemed
I couldn't get enough of it back. I ate and I ate, so much and so fast that I
actually went to the bathroom and vomited. I came out dizzy and sated
with the phantom warmth of my binge.

51 And beneath the face of her worry, I thought, my mother was smiling.

52 From that day, my mother prepared a certain meal to welcome me
home. It was always the same. Even as I rode the school's shuttle bus from
Exeter to Logan airport, I could already see the exact arrangement of my
mother's table.

53 I knew that we would eat in the kitchen, the table brimming with
plates. There was the *kalbi*, of course, broiled or grilled depending on the

season. Leaf lettuce, to wrap the meat with. Bowls of garlicky clam broth with miso and tofu and fresh spinach. Shavings of cod dusted in flour and then dipped in egg wash and fried. Glass noodles with onions and shiitake. Scallion-and-hot-pepper pancakes. Chilled steamed shrimp. Seasoned salads of bean spouts, spinach, and white radish. Crispy squares of seaweed. Steamed rice with barley and red beans. Homemade kimchi. It was all there—the old flavors I knew, the beautiful salt, the sweet, the excellent taste.

After the meal, my father and I talked about school, but I could never say enough for it to make any sense. My father would often recall his high school principal, who had gone to England to study the methods and traditions of the public schools, and regaled students with stories of the great Eton man. My mother sat with us, paring fruit, not saying a word but taking everything in. When it was time to go to bed, my father said good night first. I usually watched television until the early morning. My mother would sit with me for an hour or two, perhaps until she was accustomed to me again, and only then would she kiss me and head upstairs to sleep.

During the following days, it was always the cooking that started our conversations. She'd hold an inquest over the cold leftovers we ate at lunch, discussing each dish in terms of its balance of flavors or what might have been prepared differently. But mostly I begged her to leave the dishes alone. I wish I had paid more attention. After her death, when my father and I were the only ones left in the house, drifting through the rooms like ghosts, I sometimes tried to make that meal for him. Though it was too much for two, I made each dish anyway, taking as much care as I could. But nothing turned out quite right—not the color, not the smell. At the table, neither of us said much of anything. And we had to eat the food for days.

I remember washing rice in the kitchen one day and my mother's saying in English, from her usual seat, "I made a big mistake."

"About Exeter?"

"Yes. I made a big mistake. You should be with us for that time. I should never let you go there."

"So why did you?" I said.

"Because I didn't know I was going to die."

I let her words pass. For the first time in her life, she was letting herself speak her full mind, so what else could I do?

"But you know what?" she spoke up. "It was better for you. If you stayed home, you would not like me so much now."

I suggested that maybe I would like her even more.

She shook her head. "Impossible."

Sometimes I still think about what she said, about having made a mistake. I would have left home for college, that was never in doubt, but those years I was away at boarding school grew more precious to her as her illness progressed. After many months of exhaustion and pain and the haze of the drugs, I thought that her mind was beginning to fade, for more and more it

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seemed that she was seeing me again as her fifteen-year-old boy, the one she had dropped off in New Hampshire on a cloudy September afternoon.

66 I remember the first person I met, another new student, named Zack, who walked to the welcome picnic with me. I had planned to eat with my parents—my mother had brought a coolerful of food even that first day—but I learned of the cookout and told her that I should probably go. I wanted to go, of course. I was excited, and no doubt fearful and nervous, and I must have thought I was only thinking ahead. She agreed wholeheartedly, saying I certainly should. I walked them to the car, and perhaps I hugged them, before saying goodbye. One day, after she died, my father told me what happened on the long drive home to Syracuse.

67 He was driving the car, looking straight ahead. Traffic was light on the Massachusetts Turnpike, and the sky was nearly dark. They had driven for more than two hours and had not yet spoken a word. He then heard a strange sound from her, a kind of muffled chewing noise, as if something inside her were grinding its way out.

68 “So, what’s the matter?” he said, trying to keep an edge to his voice.

69 She looked at him with her ashen face and she burst into tears. He began to cry himself, and pulled the car over onto the narrow shoulder of the turnpike, where they stayed for the next half hour or so, the blank-faced cars droning by them in the cold, onrushing night.

70 Every once in a while, when I think of her, I’m driving alone somewhere on the highway. In the twilight, I see their car off to the side, a blue Olds coupe with a landau top, and as I pass them by I look back in the mirror and I see them again, the two figures huddling together in the front seat. Are they sleeping? Or kissing? Are they all right?

Content

1. Explain the significance of the title, “Coming Home Again,” as it pertains to father, mother, and son at various stages of their relationship. How does coming home again affect the son’s maturation in contrast to his mother’s gradual deterioration from illness?

2. Show the important ways in which Korean food, in preparation and consumption, is a prominent and integrating feature of this narrative. Must readers have eaten these foods—or at least know what they are—to understand the narrative? Explain. Why does Lee devote so much space to cooking and occasions for eating (see, for example, ¶s 7–9; ¶s 31–46; ¶s 50–53)?

Strategies/Structures/Language

3. There are two significant flashbacks in this tale: Lee’s mother’s effortless display of her expertise as a basketball player (¶s 16–19) and Lee’s arrival at boarding school (¶s 66–69). Both demonstrate new aspects of the principal characters and their relationships. Explain.

4. What is the significance, symbolic and literal, of when people eat or can't eat or won't eat (§s 9, 12–13, 55, 66)? Explore some of the significant connections between preparing and eating food and expressing love.

For Writing

5. Write a paper on significant aspects of “coming home again.” What are your cultural expectations of when it is appropriate for children to move out of their parents’ house and start living on their own? Under what circumstances is it appropriate for a grown child—living in America—to move back home with his or her parents? Have you—or someone close to you—ever done this? For what reasons? With what expectations? Consequences? Is this seen to be a temporary (and for how long a period) or a permanent condition? If you wish, you could write this with a partner whose experiences or views on the subject differ significantly from your own.

6. Explore some of the significant connections between preparing and eating food and expressing love (see also Britt, 261–63). Under what conditions can this be healthful? Potentially or actually destructive? Examine the relationship between using “Coming Home Again” as the starting point for your thinking.

7. In “Coming Home Again” the process of Lee’s mother’s gradual death is juxtaposed with the processes of Lee’s own cooking, and family meals. Using this as a model, analyze one process to illuminate another. For instance, in going to college to master a field of knowledge, one is preparing for a professional career in many ways and at the same time (we hope) maturing as a human being in ways related to and independent of that career. Analyze these strands of maturation to show how they reinforce—and perhaps contradict—one another.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

NTOZAKE SHANGE

In 1971, the year after she graduated from Barnard with a BA in American Studies, Paulette Williams, daughter of a noted St. Louis surgeon and a social worker, adopted the Zulu name Ntozake Shange (en-toh-ZAH-kee SHAHN-gay), Ntozake meaning “she who comes with her own things” and Shange, “who walks like a lion.” Within three years of earning an MA from the University of Southern California (1973), her first and most memorable play had been produced, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. It received an Obie award for the best play of 1977 and Tony and Grammy award nominations, and it established Shange as a writer as well as a dancer and an actress who performed in her own work.

Shange’s works include over a dozen other plays and dramatic adaptations, ranging from *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1978) to an Obie award-winning adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1981). She has written novels, including *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter* (1994);

poetry, of which *Nappy Edges* (1978) is the best known; children's books, including *Ellington Was Not a Street* (2003); and numerous short stories and essays. "What Is It We Really Harvestin' Here?" published in *Creative Non-fiction* in 1998, is characteristic of Shange's free-flowing form and fast-paced conversational style, simultaneously lyrical, comical, and satiric. In the process of explaining how to garden, Shange incorporates African-American history, social commentary, autobiography, and recipes—American studies with attitude.

What Is It We Really Harvestin' Here?

1 **W**e got a sayin', "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," which is usually meant as a compliment. To my mind, it also refers to the delectable treats we as a people harvested for our owners and for our own selves all these many years, slave or free. In fact, we knew something about the land, sensuality, rhythm and ourselves that has continued to elude our captors—puttin' aside all our treasures in the basement of the British Museum, or the Met, for that matter. What am I talkin' about? A different approach to the force of gravity, to our bodies, and what we produce: a reverence for the efforts of the group and the intimate couple. Harvest time and Christmas were prime occasions for courtin'. A famine, a drought, a flood or Lent do not serve as inspiration for couplin', you see.

2 The Juba, a dance of courtin' known in slave quarters of North America and the Caribbean, is a phenomenon that stayed with us through the jitterbug, the wobble, the butterfly, as a means of courtin' that's apparently very colored, and very "African." In fact we still have it and we've never been so "integrated"—the *Soul Train* dancers aren't all black anymore, but the dynamic certainly is. A visitor to Cuba in Lynne Fauley Emery's "Dance Horizon Book" described the Juba as a series of challenges.

A woman advances and commencing a slow dance, made up of shuffling of the feet and various contortions of the body, thus challenges a rival from among the men. One of these, bolder than the rest, after a while steps out, and the two then strive which shall tire the other; the woman performing many feats which the man attempts to rival, often excelling them, amid the shouts of the rest. A woman will sometimes drive two or three successive beaux from the ring, yielding her place at length to some impatient belle.

3 John Henry went up against a locomotive, but decades before we simply were up against ourselves and the elements. And so we are performers in the fields, in the kitchens, by kilns, and for one another. Sterling Stuckey points out, in "Slave Culture," however, that by 1794 "it was illegal

to allow slaves to dance and drink on the premises . . . without the written consent of their owners," the exceptions being Christmas and the burials, which are communal experiences. And what shall we plant and harvest, so that we might "Hab big times duh fus hahves, and duh fus ting wut growed we take tuh duh church so as ebrybody could hab a pieces ub it. We pray over it and shout. Wen we hab a dance, we use tuh shout in a rinig. We ain't have wutyuh call a propuh dance today."

Say we've gone about our owners' business. Planted and harvested his crop of sugar cane, remembering that the "ratio of slaves/sugar was ten times that of slaves/tobacco and slaves/cotton." That to plant a sugar crop we have to dig a pit 3 feet square and a few inches deep into which one young plant is set. Then, of course, the thing has to grow. A mature sugar-cane plant is 3–9 feet tall. That's got to be cut at exactly the right point. Then we've got to crush it, boil it, refine it, from thick black syrup to fine white sugar, to make sure, as they say in Virginia, that we "got the niggah out." Now it's time to tend to our own gardens. Let's grow some sweet potatoes to "keep the niggah alive."

Sweet Potatoes

Like everything else, we have to start with something. Now we need a small piece of potato with at least one of those scraggly roots hanging about for this native Central American tuber. This vegetable will stand more heat than almost any other grown in the United States. It does not take to cool weather, and any kind of frost early or seasonal will kill the leaves, and if your soil gets cold the tubers themselves will not look very good. Get your soil ready at least two weeks before planting, weeding, turning, and generally disrupting the congealed and solid mass we refer to as dirt, so that your hands and the tubers may move easily through the soil, as will water and other nutrients.

Once the soil is free of winter, two weeks after the last frost, plant the potato slips in 6–12 inch ridges, 3–4.5 feet apart. Separate the plants by 9–12 inches. If we space the plants more than that, our tubers may be grand, but way too big to make good use of in the kitchen. We should harvest our sweet potatoes when the tubers are not quite ripe, but of good size, or we can wait until the vines turn yellow. Don't handle our potatoes too roughly, which could lead to bruising and decay. If a frost comes upon us unexpectedly, take those potatoes out the ground right away. Our potatoes will show marked improvement during storage, which allows the starch in them to turn to sugar. Nevertheless let them lie out in the open for 2 to 3 hours to fully dry. Then move them to a moist and warm storage space. The growing time for our crop'll vary from 95 to 125 days.

The easiest thing to do with a sweet potato is to bake it. In its skin. I coat the thing with olive oil, or butter in a pinch. Wrap it in some aluminum foil, set it in the oven at 400 degrees. Wait till I hear sizzling, anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour after, in a very hot oven. I can eat it with my supper at that point or I can let it cool off for later. (One of the sexiest dates I ever went on was to the movies to see

"El Mariachi." My date brought along chilled baked sweet potatoes and ginger beer. Much nicer than canola-sprayed "battered" popcorn with too syrupy Coca-Cola, wouldn't you say?)

Mustard Greens

- 8 *No, they are not the same as collards. We could say they, with their frilly edges and sinuous shapes, have more character, are more flirtatious, than collards. This green can be planted in the spring or the fall, so long as the soil is workable (not cold). It's not a hot weather plant, preferring short days and temperate climates. We can use the same techniques for mustard greens that we use for lettuce. Sowing the seeds in rows 12–18 inches apart, seedlings 4–8 inches apart. These plants should get lots of fertilizer to end up tender, lots of water, too. They should be harvested before they are fully mature. Now, you've got to be alert, because mustard greens grow fast, 25–40 days from the time you set them in the soil to harvest. When it comes time to reap what you've sown, gather the outer leaves when they are 3–4 inches long, tender enough; let the inner leaves then develop more or wait till it's hot and harvest the whole plant.*
- 9 *Now we cook the mustard greens just like the collards, or we don't have to cook it at all. This vegetable is fine in salads or on sandwiches and soups. If you shy away from pungent tastes, mix these greens with some collards, kale, or beet greens. That should take some of the kick out of them. I still like my peppers and vinegar, though. If we go back, pre-Columbus, the Caribs did, too. According to Spanish travelers, the Caribs, who fancied vegetables, added strong peppers called aji-aji to just about everything. We can still find aji-aji on some sauces from Spanish-speaking countries if we read the labels carefully. Like "La Morena." So appropriate.*

Watermelon

- 10 *The watermelon is an integral part of our actual life as much as it is a feature of our stereotypical lives in the movies, posters, racial jokes, toys, and early American portraits of the "happy darky." We could just as easily been eatin' watermelon in D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" as chicken legs. The implications are the same. Like the watermelon, we were a throwback of "African" pre-history, which isn't too off, since Lucy, the oldest Homo sapiens currently known is from Africa, too.*
- 11 *But I remember being instructed not to order watermelon in restaurants or to eat watermelon in any public places because it makes white people think poorly of us. They already did that, so I don't see what the watermelon was going to precipitate. Europeans brought watermelon with them from Africa anyway. In Massachusetts by 1629 it was recorded as "abounding." In my rebelliousness as a child, I got so angry about the status of the watermelon, I tried to grow some in the flower box on our front porch in Missouri. My harvest was minimal to say the least.*
- 12 *Here's how you can really grow you some watermelon. They like summer heat, particularly sultry, damp nights. If we can grow watermelons, we can grow ourselves almost any other kind of melon. The treatment is the same. Now, these need some space, if we're looking for a refrigerator-sized melon or one ranging*

from 25–30 pounds. Let them have a foot between plants in between rows 4–6 feet apart. They need a lot of fertilizer, especially if the soil is heavy and doesn't drain well. When the runners (vines) are a foot to a foot-and-a-half long, fertilize again about 8 inches from the plant itself. Put some more fertilizer when the first melons appear. Watermelons come in different varieties, but I'm telling you about the red kind. I have no primal response to a golden or blanchéd fleshed melon. Once your melons set on the vines and start to really take up some space, be sure not to forget to water the vines during the ripening process.

When is your watermelon ripe? You can't tell by thumping it nor by the curly tail at the point where the melon is still on the vine. The best way to know if your melon is ready is by looking at the bottom. The center turns from a light yellow to deep amber. Your melon'll have a powdery or mushy tasteless sorta taste if you let it ripen too long.

Surely you've seen enough pictures or been to enough picnics to know how to eat a watermelon, so I won't insult you with that information. However, there is a fractious continuing debate about whether to sprinkle sugar or salt on your watermelon slice. I am not going to take sides in this matter.

Some of us were carried to the New World specifically because we knew 'bout certain crops, know 'bout the groomin' and harvestin' of rice, for instance.

Plantation owners were perfectly aware of the superiority . . . of African slaves from rice country. Littlefield (journalist) writes that "as early as 1700 ships from Carolina were reported in the Gambia River." . . . In a letter dated 1756, Henry Laurens, a Charleston merchant, wrote, "The slaves from the River Gambia are prefer'd to all others with us save the Gold Coast." The previous year he had written: "Gold Coast or Gambias are best; next to them the Windward Coast are prefer'd to Angolas."

These bits of information throw an entirely different, more dignified light on "colored" cuisine, for me. Particularly since I was raised on rice and my mother's people on both sides are indefatigable Carolinians, South, to be exact, South Carolinians. To some, our "phrenologically immature brains" didn't have consequence until our mastery of the cultivation of "cargo," "patna," "joponica," and finally Carolina rice, "small-grained, rather long and wiry, and remarkably white" was transferred to the books and records of our owners. Nevertheless, our penchant for rice was not dampened by its relationship to our bondage. Whether through force or will, we held on to our rice-eatin' heritage. I repeat, I was raised on rice. If I was Joe Williams, instead a singin' "Every day, every day, I sing the blues," I'd be sayin', "Oh, every day, almost any kinda way, I get my rice."

My poor mother, Eloise, Ellie, for short, made the mistake of marrying a man who was raised by a woman from Canada. So every day, he wanted a potato, some kinda potato, mashed, boiled, baked, scalloped, fried, just a potato. Yet my mother was raising a sixth generation of Carolinians,

which meant we had to eat some kinda rice. Thus, Ellie was busy fixing potato for one and rice for all the rest every day, until I finally learnt how to do one or the other and gave her a break. I asked Ellie Williams how her mother, Viola, went about preparing the rice for her “chirren”—a Low-country linguistic lapse referring to off-spring like me. Anyway, this is what Mama said.

Mama’s Rice

- 18 *“We’d buy some rice in a brown paper bag (this is in The Bronx). Soak it in a bit of water. Rinse it off and cook it the same way we do now.” “How is that, Ma?” I asked. “Well, you boil a certain amount of water. Let it boil good. Add your rice and let it boil till tender. Stirring every so often because you want the water to evaporate. You lift your pot. You can tell if your rice is okay because there’s no water there. Then you fluff it with a fork. You want every kind, extra, extra, what you call it. No ordinary olive oil will do.*
- 19 *“Heat this up. Just a little bit of it. You don’t want no greasy rice, do you? Heat this until, oh, it is so hot that the smoke is coming quick. Throw in 3–4 cloves garlic, maybe 1 cup chopped onion too, I forgot. Let that sizzle and soften with ½ cup each cilantro, pimiento, and everything. But don’t let this get burned, no. So add your 4 cups water and 2 cups rice. Turn up the heat some more till there’s a great boiling of rice, water, seasonings. The whole thing. Then leave it alone for a while with the cover on so all the rice cooks even. Now, when you check and see there’s only a small bit of water left in the bottom of the pot, stir it all up. Turn the heat up again and wait. When there’s no water left at all, at all. Just watch the steam coming up. Of course you should have a good pegau by now, but the whole pot of your rice should be delicioso, ready even for my table. If you do as I say.”*
- 20 For North Americans, a pot with burnt rice on the bottom is a scary concept. But all over the Caribbean, it’s a different story entirely. In order to avoid making *asopao*—a rice moist and heavy with the sofrito or tomato-achiote mixture, almost like a thick soup where the rice becomes one mass instead of standing, each grain on its own—it is necessary to let the rice on the bottom of the pot get a crustlike bottom, assuring that all moisture has evaporated. My poor North American mother, Ellie, chastises me frequently for “ruining” good rice with all this spice. Then I remind her that outside North America we Africans were left to cook in ways that reminded us of our mother’s cooking, not Jane Austen’s characters. The rice tastes different, too. But sometimes I cheat and simply use Goya’s Sazon—after all, I’m a modern woman. I shouldn’t say that too loudly, though. Mathilde can hear all the way from her front porch any blasphemous notion I have about good cooking. No, it is her good cooking that I am to learn. I think it is more than appropriate that we know something about some of the crops that led to most of us African descendants of the Diaspora, being here, to eat anything at all.

But rather than end on a sour note, I am thinking of my classes with the great Brazilian dancer, choreographer and teacher Mercedes Baptista at the now legendary Clark Center. We learned a harvest dance, for there are many, but the movements of this celebratory ritual were lyrical and delicate, far from the tortured recounts of EuroAmericans to our “jiga-boo” gatherings; no gyrations, repetitive shuffling that held no interest. Indeed, the simple movement of the arms, which we worked on for days until we got it, resembled a tropical port-à-bras worthy of any ballerina. Our hip movements, ever so subtle, with four switches to the left, then four to the right, all the while turning and covering space. The head leaning in the direction of the hips, the arms moving against it, till the next hip demanded counterpoint.

A healthy respect for the land, for what we produce for the blessing of a harvest begot dances of communal joy. On New Year’s Eve in the late fifties, we danced the Madison; today it’s a burning rendition of “The Electric Slide.” Eighty-years-olds jammin’ with toddlers after the weddin’ toast. No, we haven’t changed so much.

Content

1. What’s the point of Shange’s title? What is it “we really harvestin’”?
2. Shange gives directions on how to grow, prepare, and eat several foods—sweet potatoes, mustard greens, watermelon—and how to cook “Mama’s Rice.” Like many other directions written by experts, these seem easy to follow and the results seem assured. Why are most directions written so simply and positively?
3. “What Is It We Really Harvestin’ Here?” was published in *Creative Nonfiction*, a publication usually read by creative writers, not in a home or cooking magazine. Why might this piece appeal to readers who are writers? Or to any readers who don’t garden? Or cook? Or eat much “‘colored’ cuisine”?

Strategies/Structures/Language

4. Shange’s planting instructions are presented in a matrix of African-American political and social history (§s 1–4), family history (§s 16–17), and autobiography (§s 20–22). How do these elements make the reading different from the usual instructions on how to perform a process, such as following a recipe or planting a garden?
5. Whom does Shange include in *we*? Is the *we* of the title and “We got a sayin’” (§ 1, sentence 1), the same as the *we* of “*we* as a people” (§ 1, sentence 2)? The same as the *we* of “And so we are performers in the fields” (§ 3, sentence 2)? Why does it matter, to writer and readers, who *we* are?
6. How does Shange’s style suit her subject? In this essay that is largely written in standard English, what are the effects of using dialect spelling (as in *chirren* [§ 7]), or omitting the -g at the end of *ing* words, as in *puttin’* (§ 1)? Why does Shange quote entire sentences in dialect: “Wen we hab a dance . . .” (§ 3)? Why does Shange use dialect much more extensively in the first four paragraphs of the essay than later on?

For Writing

7. If you're a competent cook, write out a favorite recipe so others less experienced than you can prepare it. Identify unusual ingredients, the major steps to follow, and also any subprocesses that need to be done to prepare the dish. Have someone read (better yet, try out) your recipe. What questions do they ask? Incorporate the information from your answers into the recipe as you revise it.

8. Explain how to do or make something that's integral to your cultural background(s) (such as how to interpret or perform a particular religious ritual, celebrate a particular holiday, do a particular dance step, play a particular game, perform a specific athletic activity, engage in a flirtation or courtship). Embed your instructions, as Shange does, in a matrix of cultural, family, or personal history—tell some true stories to provide a context for the instructions that will help to explain why certain things are done in a certain way, as well as how. If diagrams or photographs would clarify, add them as appropriate.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

NING YU

Ning Yu was born in 1955 in Beijing, People's Republic of China, and came to the United States in 1986 for graduate study. He earned a PhD in English from the University of Connecticut in 1993 and is now a professor of English and Chinese literature at Western Washington University.

Ning Yu recounts some of the significant events of his youth in the following prize-winning essay, "Red and Black, or One English Major's Beginning." When he was in fourth grade, his school was closed down as a consequence of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," which overturned the existing social order. The intellectual class (the "blacks," in Yu's classification scheme) to which Yu's family belonged because his father was a professor of Chinese language and literature, were replaced on their jobs by members of the People's Liberation Army, "the reds," whose status—as we can see from Ning Yu's teachers—was determined by their political loyalty rather than their academic training. So Ning Yu learned one kind of English at school, the rote memorization of political slogans: "Long live Chairman Mao! Down with the Soviet Neo-Czarists!" He explains that the Cultural Revolution stifled originality of language, as well as of thought. "Consequently," he says, "I used the clichés deliberately to create a realistic atmosphere for my story, and also ironically to attack the decade of clichés."

Ning Yu learned another kind of English, the rich, imaginative language of high-culture literature, from his father. On the verge of his fourth imprisonment as an intellectual (and therefore by definition subversive), Dr. Yu taught his teenage son the alphabet and some basic grammar. He

gave his son a copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and an old English-Chinese dictionary and told him to translate the novel—which Ning Yu “struggled through from cover to cover” during the nineteen months of his father's incarceration. Ning Yu's essay makes clear the relations among politics, social class, and education under the Maoist regime.

❁ *Red and Black, or One English Major's Beginning*

I have always told my friends that my first English teacher was my father. That is the truth, but not the whole truth. It was a freezing morning more than twenty years ago, we, some fifty-odd boys and girls, were shivering in a poorly heated classroom when the door was pushed open and in came a gust of wind and Comrade Chang Hong-gen, our young teacher. Wrapped in an elegant army overcoat, Comrade Chang strode in front of the blackboard and began to address us in outrageous gibberish. His gestures, his facial expressions, and his loud voice unmistakably communicated that he was lecturing us as a People's Liberation Army captain would address his soldiers before a battle—in revolutionary war movies, that is. Of course we didn't understand a word of the speech until he translated it into Chinese later:

Comrades, red-guards, and revolutionary pupils:

The Great Revolutionary Teacher Marx teaches us: “A foreign language is an important weapon in the struggle of human life.” Our Great Leader, Great Teacher, Great Supreme-Commander, and Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao, has also taught us that it is not too difficult to learn a foreign language. “Nothing in the world is too difficult if you are willing to tackle it with the same spirit in which we conquered this mountain.”

Now, as you know, the Soviet Social Imperialists and the U.S. Imperialists have agreed on a venomous scheme to enslave China. For years the U.S. Imperialists have brought war and disaster to Vietnam; and you must have heard that the Soviet troops invaded our Jewel Island in Heilongjiang Province last month. Their evil purpose is obvious—to invade China, the Soviets from the north and the Americans from the south through Vietnam.

We are not afraid of them, because we have the leadership of Chairman Mao, the invincible Mao Zedong Thought, and seven hundred million people. But we need to be prepared. As intellectual youth, you must not only prepare to sacrifice your lives for the Party and the Motherland, but also learn to stir up our people's patriotic zeal and to shatter the morale of the enemy troops. To

encourage our own people, you must study Chairman Mao's works very hard and learn your lessons well with your teacher of Chinese; to crush the enemy, you must learn your English lessons well with me.

- 2 Then Comrade Chang paused, his face red and sweat beading on the tip of his nose. Though nonplussed, we could see that he was genuinely excited, but we were not sure whether his excitement was induced by "patriotic zeal" or the pleasure of hearing grandiose sounds issued from his own lips. For my part, I suspected that verbal intoxication caused his excitement. Scanning the classroom, he seemed to bask in our admiration rather than to urge us to sacrifice our lives for the Party. He then translated the speech into Chinese and gave us another dose of eloquence:

From now on, you are not pupils anymore, but soldiers—young, intellectual soldiers fighting at a special front. Neither is each English word you learn a mere word anymore. Each new word is a bullet shot at the enemy's chest, and each sentence a hand grenade.

- 3 Comrade Chang was from a "red" family. His name *hong* means red in Chinese, and *gen* means root, so literally, he was "Chang of Red Root." Students said that his father was a major in the People's Liberation Army, and his grandfather a general, and that both the father and the grandfather had "contributed a great deal to the Party, the Motherland, and the Chinese working people." When the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" started, Mr. Chang had just graduated from the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute, a prestigious university in the capital where some thirty languages were taught to people "of red roots." Red youngsters were trained there to serve in the Foreign Ministry, mostly in Chinese embassies and consulates in foreign countries. We understood that Comrade Chang would work only for a token period in our ghetto middle school. At the time, the Foreign Ministry was too busy with the Cultural Revolution to hire new translators, but as soon as the "Movement" was over and everything back to normal, Comrade Chang, we knew, would leave us and begin his diplomatic career.

- 4 In the late 1960s the Revolution defined "intellectual" as "subversive." So my father, a university professor educated in a British missionary school in Tianjin, was regarded as a "black" element, an enemy of the people. In 1967, our family was driven out of our university faculty apartment, and I found myself in a ghetto middle school, an undeserving pupil of the red expert Comrade Chang.

- 5 In a shabby and ill-heated schoolroom I began my first English lesson, not "from the very beginning" by studying the alphabet, but with some powerful "hand grenades":

Give up; no harm!
Drop your guns!
Down with the Soviet Neo-Czarists!

Down with U.S. Imperialism!
 Long live Chairman Mao!
 We wish Chairman Mao a long, long life!
 Victory belongs to our people!

These sentences turned out to be almost more difficult and more dangerous to handle than real grenades, for soon the words became mixed up in our heads. So much so that not a few "revolutionary pupils" reconstructed the slogans to the hearty satisfactions of themselves but to the horror of Comrade Chang:

Long live the Soviet Neo-Czarists!
 Victory belongs to your guns!

Upon hearing this, Comrade Chang turned pale and shouted at us, "You idiots! Had you uttered anything like that in Chinese, young as you are, you could have been thrown into jail for years. Probably me too! Now you follow me closely: Long live Chairman Mao!"

"Long live Chairman Mao!" we shouted back.

"Long live Chairman Mao!"

"Long live Chairman Mao!"

"Down with the Soviet Neo-Czarists!"

"Down with the Soviet Neo-Czarists!"

Comrade Chang decided that those two sentences were enough for idiots to learn in one lesson, and he told us to forget the other sentences for the moment. Then he wrote the two sentences on the chalkboard and asked us to copy them in our English exercise books. Alas, how could anybody in our school know what that was!

I wrote the two sentences on my left palm and avoided putting my left hand in my pocket or mitten for the rest of the day. I also remembered what Comrade Chang said about being thrown into jail, for as the son of a "black, stinking bourgeois intellectual," I grasped the truth in his warning. The two English sentences were a long series of meaningless, unutterable sounds. Comrade Chang had the power to impose some Chinese meaning on my mind. So, before I forgot or confused the sounds, I invented a makeshift transliteration in Chinese for the phonetically difficult and politically dangerous parts of the sentences. I put the Chinese words *qui*, *mian*, and *mao* (cut, noodle, hair) under "Chairman Mao," and *niu za sui* (beef organ meat) under "Neo-Czarists." "Down with" were bad words applied to the enemies; "long live" were good words reserved for the great leader. These were easy to remember. So I went home with a sense of security, thinking the device helped me distinguish the Great Leader from the enemy.

The next morning, Comrade "Red Roots" asked us to try our weapons before the blackboard. Nobody volunteered. Then Comrade Chang began calling us by name. My friend "Calf" was the first to stand up. He did not remember anything. He didn't try to learn the words, and he told me to "forget it" when I was trying to memorize the weird sounds. In fact, none of my classmates remembered the sentences.



What does it mean to become literate? Are there significant differences in this process among cultures, nationalities? Compare your own experience of learning to read and write English or another language with the processes of language learning that Ning Yu describes in "Red and Black."

- 15 My fellow pupils were all "red" theoretically. But they were not Comrade Chang's type of red. Their parents were coolies, candy-peddlers, or bricklayers. Poor and illiterate. Before the 1949 revolution, these people led miserable lives. Even the revolution didn't improve their lives much, and parents preferred their children to do chores at home rather than fool around with books, especially after the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" started in 1966. Books were dangerous. Those who read books often ran into trouble for having ideas the Party didn't want them to have. "Look at the intellectuals," they said. "They suffer even more than us illiterates." They also knew that their children could not become "red experts" like Comrade Chang, because they themselves were working people who didn't contribute to the Party, the Motherland—or to the liberation of the working people themselves.
- 16 Thus my friends didn't waste time in remembering nonsense. Still Comrade Chang's questions had to be answered. Since I was the only one in class not from a red family, my opinion was always the last asked, if asked at all. I stood up when Comrade Chang called my name. I had forgotten the English sounds too, for I took Calf's advice. But before I repeated the apology already repeated fifty times by my friends, I glanced at my left palm and inspiration lit up my mind. "Long live *qie mian mao!* Down with *niu za sui!*" My friends stared, and Comrade Chang glared at

me. He couldn't believe his ears. "Say that again." I did. This time my classmates burst into a roar of laughter. "Cut noodle hair! Beef organ meat!" they shouted again and again.

"Shut up!" Comrade Chang yelled, trembling with anger and pointing at me with his right index finger. "What do you mean by 'cut noodle hair'? That insults our great leader Chairman Mao." Hearing that, the class suddenly became silent. The sons and daughters of the "Chinese working people" knew how serious an accusation that could be. But Calf stood up and said: "Comrade Teacher, it is truly a bad thing that Ning Yu should associate Chairman Mao with such nonsense as 'cut noodle hair.' But he didn't mean any harm. He was trying to throw a hand grenade at the enemy. He also called the Soviets 'beef organ meat.' He said one bad thing (not enough respect for Chairman Mao) but then said a good thing (condemning the Soviets). One take away one is zero. So he didn't really do anything wrong, right?"

Again the room shook with laughter.

Now Comrade Chang flew into a rage and began to lecture us about how class enemies often say good things to cover up evil intentions. Calf, Chang said, was a red boy and should draw a line between himself and me, the black boy. He also threatened to report my "evil words" to the revolutionary committee of the middle school. He said that in the "urgent state of war" what I said could not be forgiven or overlooked. He told me to examine my mind and conduct severe self-criticism before being punished. "The great proletarian dictatorship," he said, "is all-powerful. All good will be rewarded and all evil punished when the right time comes." He left the classroom in anger without giving us any new hand grenades.

I felt ruined. Destroyed. Undone. I could feel icy steel handcuffs closing around my wrists. I could hear the revolutionary slogans that the mobs would shout at me when I was dragged off by the iron hand of the Proletarian Dictatorship. My legs almost failed me on my way home.

Calf knew better. "You have nothing to worry about, Third Ass."

I am the third child in my family, and it is a tradition of old Beijing to call a boy by number. So usually my family called me Thirty. But in my ghetto, when the kids wanted to be really friendly, they added the word "ass" to your number or name. This address upset me when I first moved into the neighborhood. I was never comfortable with that affix during the years I lived there, but at that moment I appreciated Calf's kindness in using that affix. Words are empty shells. It's the feeling that people attach to a word that counts.

"I'll be crushed like a rotten egg by the iron fist of the Great Proletarian Dictatorship," I said.

"No way. Red Rooty is not going to tell on you. Don't you know he was more scared than you? He was responsible. How could you say such things if he had not taught you? You get it? You relax. *Qie mian mao!* You know, you really sounded like Rooty." Calf grinned.

25 Although Calf's wisdom helped me to "get it," relax I could not. My legs were as stiff as sticks and my heart beat against my chest so hard that I could hardly breathe. For many years I had tried to get rid of my "blackness" by hard work and good manners. But I could not succeed. No matter how hard I tried I could not change the fact that I was not "red." The Party denied the existence of intermediate colors. If you were not red, logically you could only be black. What Chang said proved what I guessed. But, when cornered, even a rabbit may bite. Comrade Chang, I silently imagined, if I have to be crushed, you can forget about your diplomatic career. I created a drama in which Comrade Chang, the red root, and I, the black root, were crushed into such fine powder that one could hardly tell the red from the black. All one could see was a dark, devilish purple.

26 The next morning, I went to school with a faltering heart, expecting to be called out of the classroom and cuffed. Nothing happened. Comrade Chang seemed to have forgotten my transgression and gave us three handfuls of new "bullets." He slowed down too, placing more emphasis on pronunciation. He cast the "bullets" into hand grenades only after he was sure that we could shoot the "bullets" with certainty.

27 Nothing happened to me that day, or the next day, or the week after. Calf was right. As weeks passed, my dislike of Chang dwindled and I began to feel something akin to gratitude to him. Before learning his English tongue twisters, we only recited Chairman Mao's thirty-six poems. We did that for so long that I memorized the annotations together with the text. I also memorized how many copies were produced for the first, the second, and the third printing. I was bored, and Teacher Chang's tongue twisters brought me relief. Granted they were only old slogans in new sounds. But the mere sounds and the new way of recording the sounds challenged me. Still, as an old Chinese saying goes, good luck never lasts long.

28 Forty hand grenades were as many as the Party thought proper for us to hold. Before I mastered the fortieth tongue twister—"Revolutionary committees are fine"—our "fine" revolutionary committee ordered Comrade Chang to stop English lessons and to make us dig holes for air raid shelters. Comrade Chang approached this new task with just as much "patriotic zeal" as he taught English. In truth he seemed content to let our "bullets" and "hand grenades" rust in the bottom of the holes we dug. But I was not willing to let my only fun slip away easily. When digging the holes I repeated the forty slogans silently. I even said them at home in bed. One night I uttered a sentence as I climbed onto my top bunk. Reading in the bottom bunk, my father heard me and was surprised. He asked where I had learned the words. Then for the first time I told him about Comrade Chang's English lessons.

29 Now it may seem strange for a middle school boy not to turn to his family during a "political crisis." But at that time, it was not strange at all. By then my mother, my sister, and my brother had already been sent to the

countryside in two different remote provinces. Getting help from them was almost impossible, for they had enough pressing problems themselves. Help from my father was even more impractical: he was already "an enemy of the people," and therefore whatever he said or did for me could only complicate my problems rather than resolve them. So I kept him in the dark. Since we had only each other in the huge city of eight million people, we shared many things, but not political problems.

Our home in the working class neighborhood was a single seventeen-square-meter room. Kitchen, bathroom, sitting room, study, bedroom, all in one. There was no ceiling, so we could see the black beams and rafters when we lay in bed. The floor was a damp and sticky dirt, which defied attempts at sweeping and mopping. The walls were yellow and were as damp as the dirt floor. To partition the room was out of the question. Actually my parents had sold their king-sized bed and our single beds, and bought two bunk beds in their stead. My mother and sister each occupied a top bunk, my father slept in one bottom bunk, and my brother and I shared the other. Red Guards had confiscated and burned almost all of my father's Chinese books, but miraculously they left his English books intact. The English books were stuffed under the beds on the dirt floor. We lived in this manner for more than a year till the family members were scattered all over China, first my siblings to a province in the northwest, and then my mother to southern China. They were a thousand miles from us and fifteen hundred miles from each other. After they left, I moved to the top bunk over my father, and we piled the books on the other bed. Thanks to the hard covers, only the bottom two layers of the books had begun to mold.

That evening, after hearing me murmuring in English, my father gestured for me to sit down on his bunk. He asked me whether I knew any sentences other than the one he had heard. I jumped at the opportunity to go through the inventory of my English arsenal. After listening to my forty slogans my father said: "You have a very good English teacher. He has an excellent pronunciation, standard Oxford pronunciation. But the sentences are not likely to be found in any books written by native English speakers. Did he teach you how to read?"

"I can read all those sentences if you write them out." 32

"If I write them? But can't *you* write them by yourself?" 33

"No." 34

"Did he teach you grammar?" 35

"No." 36

"Did he teach you the alphabet?" 37

"No." 38

My father looked amused. Slowly he shook his head, and then asked: "Can you recognize the words, the separate words, when they appear in different contexts?" 39

"I think so, but I'm not sure." 40

41 He re-opened the book that he was reading and turned to the first page and pointed with his index finger at the first word in the first sentence, signaling me to identify it.

42 I shook my head.

43 He moved the finger to the next word. I didn't know that either. Nor did I know the third word, the shortest word in the line, the word made up of a single letter. My father traced the whole sentence slowly, hoping that I could identify some words. I recognized the bullet "in" and at once threw a hand grenade at him: "Beloved Chairman Mao, you are the red sun *in* our hearts." Encouraged, my father moved his finger back to the second word in the sentence. This time I looked at the word more closely but couldn't recognize it. "It's an 'is,'" he said. "You know 'are' but not 'is'! The third word in this sentence is an 'a'. It means 'one.'" It is the first letter in the alphabet and you don't know that either! What a teacher! A well-trained one too!" He then cleared his throat and read the whole sentence aloud: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

44 The sounds he uttered reminded me of Chang's opening speech, but they flowed out of my father's mouth smoothly. Without bothering about the meaning of the sentence, I asked my father to repeat it several times because I liked the rhythm. Pleased with my curiosity, my father began to explain the grammatical structure of the sentence. His task turned out to be much harder than he expected, for he had to explain terms such as "subject," "object," "nouns," "verbs" and "adjectives." To help me understand the structure of the English sentence, he had to teach me Chinese grammar first. He realized that the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution had made his youngest son literally illiterate, in Chinese as well as English.

45 That night, our English lessons started. He taught me the letters A through F. By the end of the week, I had learned my alphabet. Afterward he taught the basics of grammar, sometimes using my hand grenades to illustrate the rules. He also taught me the international phonetic symbols and the way to use a dictionary. For reading materials, he excerpted simple passages from whatever books were available. Some were short paragraphs while others just sentences. We started our lessons at a manageable pace, but after a couple of months, for reasons he didn't tell me till the very last, he speeded up the pace considerably. The new words that I had to memorize increased from twenty words per day to fifty. To meet the challenge, I wrote the new words on small, thin slips of paper and hid them in the little red book of Chairman Mao, so that I could memorize them during the political study hours at school. In hole-digging afternoons I recited the sentences and sometimes even little paragraphs—aloud when I was sure that Chang was not around.

46 Before the sounds and shapes of English words became less elusive, before I could confidently study by myself, my father told me that I would have to continue on my own. He was going to join the "Mao

Zedong Thought Study Group" at his university. In those years, "Mao Zedong Thought Study Group" was a broad term that could refer to many things. Used in reference to my father and people like him, it had only one meaning: a euphemism for imprisonment. He had been imprisoned once when my mother and siblings were still in Beijing. Now it had come again. I asked, "Are you detained or arrested?" "I don't know," he said. "It's just a Study Group." "Oh," I said, feeling the weight of the words. Legally, detention couldn't be any longer than fifteen days; arrest had to be followed by a conviction and a sentence, which also had a definite term. "Just a Study Group" could be a week or a lifetime. I was left on my own in a city of eight million people, my English lessons indefinitely postponed. What was worse, some people never returned alive from "Study Groups."

"When are you joining them?"

"Tomorrow."

I pretended to be "man" enough not to cry, but my father's eyes were wet when he made me promise to finish *Pride and Prejudice* by the time he came back.

After he left for the "Study Group," bedding roll on his shoulder, I took my first careful look at the book he had thrust into my hands. It was a small book with dark green cloth covers and gilt designs and letters on its spine. I lifted the front cover; the frontispiece had a flowery design and a woman figure on the upper right corner. Floating in the middle of the flowery design and as a mother, holding a baby, she held an armful of herbs, two apples or peaches, and a scroll. Her head tilted slightly toward her right, to an opened scroll intertwined with the flowers on the other side of the page. On the unrolled scroll, there were some words. I was thrilled to find that I could understand all the words in the top two lines with no difficulty except the last word: EVERYMAN, / I WILL GO WITH THEE. . . .

Two months after father entered the "Study Group," I stopped going to his university for my monthly allowance. The Party secretary of the bursar's office wore me out by telling me that my father and I didn't deserve to be fed by "working people." "Your father has never done any positive work," meaning the twenty years my father taught at the university undermined rather than contributed to socialist ideology. To avoid starvation, I picked up horse droppings in the streets and sold them to the farming communes in the suburb. Between the little cash savings my father left me and what I earned by selling dung, I managed an independent life. Meanwhile, I didn't forget my promise to my father. When I saw him again nineteen months later, I boasted of having thumbed his dictionary to shreds and struggled through Austen's novel from cover to cover. I hadn't understood the story, but I had learned many words.

My father was not surprised to find that I took pleasure in drudgery. He knew that looking up English words in a dictionary and wrestling with an almost incomprehensible text could be an exciting challenge. It provided an intellectual relief for a teenager living at a time when the entire

country read nothing but Chairman Mao's works. "Don't worry whether you are red or black," my father said. "Just be yourself. Just be an ordinary everyman. Keep up with your good work, and when you learn English well enough, you'll be sure of a guide 'in your most need.'"

Content

1. An essay of dividing its subject often draws rigid boundaries between its categories so that they are mutually exclusive. Is that true in Ning Yu's essay? Are the "reds" in total opposition to the "blacks"? If there is any overlap or intermingling among these groups, where does it occur (see, for instance, ¶ 15)? Explain your answer.
2. What sorts of comparisons can Ning Yu count on his American readers to make between his childhood, schooling, living conditions, and their own? What sorts of information does he need to supply each time he introduces an unfamiliar concept? Has he done this successfully?
3. For what reasons—political, cultural, ethical—can Ning Yu expect Western readers to be sympathetic to the plight of himself and his father? Illustrate your answer with specific examples.

Strategies/Structures/Language

4. Much of the humor in this essay depends on the students' failure to understand the English slogans their equally uncomprehending teachers oblige them to memorize. Find some examples. What would these strike English-speaking readers as funny, but not the pupils?

For Writing

5. Have you ever been given a "label"—based on your race, social class, gender, political or religious affiliation, place of residence (street or area, city or town, state)? If so, what was (or is) that label? How accurate are its connotations? Are they favorable, unfavorable, or a mixture? Does the label stereotype or limit the ways people are expected to react to it? Did (or do) you feel comfortable with that label? If not, what can you do to change it? Write a paper exploring these issues for an audience which includes at least some people whom that label doesn't fit.
6. Have you or anyone you know well ever experienced persecution or harassment—intellectual, political, economic, racial, religious, or for other reasons? If so, write a paper explaining the causes, effects, and resolution (if any) of the problem. If it's extremely complex, select one or two aspects to concentrate on in your paper. Can you count on your audience to be sympathetic to your point of view? If not, what will you need to do to win them to your side?



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at college.hmco.com/english.

Additional Topics for Writing Process Analysis

(For strategies for writing process analysis, see 130)

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES FOR WRITING PROCESS ANALYSIS

In writing on any of the process analysis topics below, you can choose among a variety of strategies to help explain a process and interpret its consequences:

- *definitions, explanations* of terms, equipment involved in the process
- a *narrative* of how the process proceeds, from start to finish
- *illustrations and examples*: to show what happens, and in what sequence
- *diagrams, drawings, flow charts, graphs* to clarify and explain
- *cause and effect*: to show why the process is justified or recommended, with what anticipated consequences
- *comparison and contrast*, between your recommendation and alternative ways of achieving the same or a similar result
- consideration of *short term* and *long term consequences* of a particular process

1. Write an essay in which you provide directions on how to perform a process—how to do or make something at which you are particularly skilled. In addition to the essential steps, you may wish to explain your own special technique or strategy that makes your method unique or better. Some possible subjects (which may be narrowed or adapted as you and your instructor wish) are these:

- a. How to get a good job, permanent or summer
- b. How to live meaningfully in a post 9/11 world (See the chapters “Terrorism” and “World Peace.”)
- c. How to scuba dive, hang-glide, rappel, jog, lift weights, train for a marathon or triathlon
- d. How to make a good first impression (on a prospective employer, on a date, on your date’s parents)
- e. How to do good for others, short term or long term
- f. How to be happy
- g. How to build a library of books, music, DVDs (see Gorry’s “Steal This MP3 File,” 512–15)
- h. How to lose (or gain) weight, or stabilize a gain or loss
- i. How to shop at a garage sale or secondhand store
- j. How to repair your own car, bicycle, computer, or other machine
- k. How to live cheaply (but enjoyably)
- l. How to study for a test—in general or in a specific subject
- m. How to administer first aid for choking, drowning, burns, or some other medical emergency
- n. How to get rich
- o. Anything else you know that others might want to learn

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2. Write an informative essay in which you explain how one of the following occurs or works. Although you should pick a subject you know something about, you may need to supplement your information by consulting outside sources.

- a. How I made a major decision (to be—or not to be—a member of a particular profession, to practice a particular religion or lifestyle . . .)
- b. How a computer (or amplifier, piano, microwave oven, or other machine) works
- c. How to save energy through using a “green” product, such as a bicycle (specify kind), hybrid car, solar heating, and show how the device works
- d. How a professional develops skill in his or her chosen field—that is, how one becomes a skilled electrical engineer, geologist, chef, tennis coach, surgeon . . . ; pick a field in which you’re interested
- e. How birds fly (or learn to fly), or some other process in the natural world
- f. How a system of the body (circulatory, digestive, respiratory, skeletal, neurological) works
- g. How the earth (or the solar system) was formed
- h. How the scientific method (or a particular variation of it) functions in a particular field
- i. How a well-run business (pick one of your choice—manufacturing, restaurant, clothing or hardware store, television repair service . . .) functions
- j. How a specific area of our federal government (or your particular local or state government legislative, executive, judicial) came into existence, or has changed over time
- k. How a system or process has gone wrong (may be satiric or humorous)
- l. How a particular drug or other medicine was developed and/or how it works, including its benefits and hazards
- m. How a great idea (on the nature of love, justice, truth, beauty . . .) found acceptance in a particular religion, culture, or smaller group
- n. How a particular culture (ethnic, regional, tribal, religious) or subculture (preppies, yuppies, pacifists, punk rockers, motorcycle gangs . . .) developed, rose, and/or declined in a larger or smaller group

3. Write a humorous paper explaining a process of the kind identified below. You will need to provide a serious analysis of the method you propose, even though the subject itself is intended to be amusing. (See Verge’s “The Habs,” 119–23.)

- a. How to make or do anything badly or inelegantly, without expertise or ability
- b. How to be popular
- c. How to survive in college
- d. How to survive a broken love affair
- e. How to be a model babysitter/son/daughter/student/employee/lover/spouse/parent
- f. How to become a celebrity
- g. Any of the topics in Writing Suggestions 1 or 2 above
- h. How a process can go dreadfully wrong