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essary passive constructions into active ones. Look for unconscious repetitions of the feeble verbs is and are. Correct lapses in tone. (I'll explain all these matters later in the book.)

Don't forget to read every sentence aloud. Your ear will catch much that your tired eye has missed. Cock your ear to the sound of the phrases, their music or lack of it, their freshness or triteness, their jarring repetitions. Ask yourself whether each sentence is immediately intelligible, and ponder the ways it could possibly be misconstrued. Above all, force yourself to search painstakingly for even small lapses in continuity—"lurches," as they're called. Remember, if your reader once loses you, you may at that moment abruptly lose your reader—for good. He has every right to demand smooth transitions between your thoughts, and every right to tune you out if he doesn't find them. "The way to perfection," wrote essayist Walter Pater, "is through a series of disgusts." Let those disgusts be yours, not the reader's.

Chapter 1 was meant to serve the function of an emergency first-aid clinic. Here, though, is where the book really begins, and this chapter is the heart of it.

I have come to the conclusion that the majority of writing problems I encounter in student papers should not be considered problems so much as symptoms. I reached this conclusion after observing how miraculously most of them disappeared after one genuine problem had been treated: the failure to think well. Thinking well, in this case, means thinking the way a skilled writer thinks.

Each profession, it would seem, has its own style of thought that must be mastered before one is at home in it. The law certainly does, and surely architecture; and so, too, with accounting, merchandizing, film directing, psychology, carpentry—you name it, they all have a style of thought related to the nature of the profession. It stands to reason that writing has its own, too. And it does.

What a novice needs more than anything, then, is to plug into the brain of an experienced writer—to understand the assumptions he typically makes, the silent monolog that is occupying his head as he composes, the special effects he is trying to achieve. Without that guiding instinct, writing will remain for him all hit-or-miss—a frustrating repetition of trial and error, trial and error, over and over again.

The Indispensable characteristic of a good writer is a style marked by lucidity.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

And how is clarity to be achieved? Mainly by taking trouble; and by writing to serve people rather than to impress them.

F. L. LUCAS
A beginning chess player faces many of the same problems. Lacking any kind of "chess sense," he sits bewildered at the board, moving first a pawn, then a bishop, then—why not?—his queen, all at random, hoping that something good will come of it but knowing that if it does, it will be a mere piece of luck. He simply has no idea how an experienced player thinks at the board. Even watching one sitting across from him, he cannot fathom what the person is trying to accomplish with a particular move, what blunders he's trying to avoid, what alternate game strategies he might be considering. He can certainly appreciate the effects, but the actual thought process is a mystery.

Unfortunately, the grandmasters have made it far easier for the chess novice to acquire chess sense than authors have made it for the writing novice to acquire its literary equivalent. They've published book after book explaining how to think well—what opening gambits to consider, what counterattacks work well, what endgame tactics to employ, and so on. Writing texts, on the other hand, tend to stress mechanics, perhaps assuming that people either know how to think or they don't. Very few books try seriously to explain the psychology of writing; very few focus on strategy and how skilled writers actually think.

I'm going to try to repair that neglect. My chief aim, both in this chapter and throughout the book, is to help you develop what we might call "writer's sense." Very shortly, I think you'll find it as indispensable as radar to a pilot, for it will serve you as a kind of intuitive guide adaptable to any number of unique writing situations. I'll begin by explaining how a novice writer typically thinks so that when I move on shortly to explain how the veteran thinks, you'll have a more vivid sense of the contrast.

The novice

Most of the novice's difficulties start with the simple fact that the paper he writes on is mute. Because it never talks back to him, and because he's concentrating so intently on coming up with ideas, he readily forgets—unlike the veteran—that another human being will eventually be trying to make sense of what he's saying. Unfortunately, his problems are deeply compounded by his tendency to be self-oriented. The result is this: his natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself and thus to write primarily for himself. Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing; it is this natural tendency that he must overcome before he can begin to think right.

He isn't aware of his egocentrism, of course, but all the symptoms of his root problem are there: he thinks through an idea only until it's passably clear to him, since for his purposes it needn't be any clearer; he dispenses with neat transitions because it's enough that he knows in his own mind how the ideas connect; he uses a private system—or no system—of punctuation; he doesn't trouble to define his terms because he knows perfectly well what he means by them; he scarcely bothers to vary his sentence structure through page after page; he paragraphs whenever the mood happens to strike him; he ends his essay abruptly when he decides he's had enough; he neglects to proofread the final job because the writing is over. Given his complete self-orientation, it's no wonder that he fails repeatedly as a writer. Actually, he's not writing at all; he's merely communing privately with himself—that is, simply putting thoughts down on paper.

I call this "unconscious writing." The unconscious writer is analogous to a person who turns his chair away from his listener, mumbles at length to the wall, and then abruptly heads for the door without so much as a backward glance.

Basically, all it takes to begin moving from unconscious writing to genuine writing is a few moments' reflection on what the writing/reading process ideally involves. Think about it. What it involves is one person earnestly attempting to communicate with another. Implicitly, then, it involves the reader every bit as much as the writer, since the success of the communication depends solely on how the reader receives it. Also, since more than one person is involved, and since all people have feelings, it has to be as subject to the basic rules of good manners as any human relationship. The writer who is fully aware of these implications—the conscious writer—resembles a person who companionably faces his listener and tries his level best to communicate with him, hopefully even persuade and charm him in the process, and who eventually bids him a genial, courteous farewell.

The big breakthrough for the novice writer, then, will occur at
the moment he begins to comprehend the social implications of what
he's doing. Far from writing in a vacuum, he is conversing, in a
very real sense, with another human being, just as I am conversing
right now with you, even though that person—like you—may be
hours, or days, or even years away from him in time. This break­
through is comparable to an infant's dawning realization that a world
exists beyond himself.

Actually, since the novice is as much a self-oriented newcomer to
his social world as the infant is to his, we might suspect that the simi­
larity doesn't end there. And we're right—it doesn't. Both of them
pass through a gradual process of socialization and deepening aware­
ness. The writer, for example, after realizing that a world—a reader
exists out there beyond himself, slowly goes on to develop an
awareness of himself from the writer's vantage point (objectivity);
next, a capacity to put himself imaginatively in the mind of the reader
(empathy); and finally, an appreciation of the reader's rights and
feelings (courtesy). You can see that the young writer is essentially
retracing, in a new context, the same psychic journey he traveled as
a child. Even the net result is comparable. Having passed the last
stage of courtesy as a child, he achieved the mark of a truly civilized
person, "social sensitivity"; when he passes the same stage as a writer,
he achieves the mark of a truly civilized author, a "readable" style.

The veteran

The thinking process of a skilled writer is directly determined by
how he conceives the writing situation. Let's start, then, by develop­
ing a realistic understanding of what that situation involves.

All writing is communication. But most writing seeks to go be­
Yond communication. It hopes to make the reader react in certain
ways—with pleased smiles, nods of assent, stabs of pathos, or what­
ever. So we can say, generally, that writing is the art of creating de­
sired effects.

Now for an essay writer, the chief desired effect is persuasion.
Thus, for him, writing really boils down to the art of selling the
reader.* Suppose you are that essay writer. You want the reader to

* I have misgivings about this commercial metaphor, with its slang connota­
tions of cheating and duping. Some readers may assume from it that I view
writing as a species of Madison Avenue huckstering, where the means are often
as unethical as the ends. I don't, of course. Indeed, one of the major themes
running through this book is the importance of writing simply, with deep con­
viction and unaffected straightforwardness. (Note, for example, the Orwell
epigraph which opens chapter 1.) So why use the metaphor at all? Why not
simply say "the art of persuading the reader"? Because selling is the more
graphic concept, and will enable me to go on to develop the twin principle of
serving the reader.

buy two things: your ideas and you, their source. That is, you want
him to view your ideas as sound and interesting, and you want him
to view you as intelligent, informed, credible, and companionable.
(All of these things, of course, are desired effects.) If you don't per­
suade him to accept you, their advocate, it's doubtful that you'll per­
suade him to buy the ideas you're trying to sell him. We buy from
salesmen we like and trust—it's human nature.

The question we must answer, then, is this: How do you sell your
reader? There are four obvious essentials:

1. Have something to say that's really worth his attention.
2. Be sold on its validity and importance so that you can sell
   it with conviction.
3. Furnish strong arguments that are well supported with concrete
   proof: facts, examples, and quotations from authorities.
4. Use language that sells—vigorouse verbs, strong nouns, and
   confidently assertive phrasing.

That looks like a pretty complete recipe for successful writing. It
isn't, though. Even if we exclude sheer artfulness, one thing is still
missing. Unfortunately, it's almost invariably missing. The ultimate
way you sell your reader is by courteously serving him—that is, satis­
fying his needs. An experienced writer knows that to serve well is to
sell well; equally, to sell well is to serve well. They are complemen­
tary activities. The means are inseparable from the ends.

Why is serving the reader so important? Because the writer, for
all practical purposes, does not exist without the assent of his reader.
The reader has the power to shut him off at whim. This humbling fact
of life makes pleasing the reader of fundamental importance, and
that's only fair. If you're going to ask the reader to give you his time
and attention, then you're in his debt, not the other way around; you must be prepared to repay his kindness with kindness of your own. Beyond pleasing him simply to square debts and keep him reading, though, there's also the practical necessity of pleasing the reader in order to persuade him. Samuel Butler long ago remarked: "We are not won by arguments that we can analyze, but by tone and temper, by the manner which is the man himself." I don't wholly agree with that, but it's certainly close to the truth. A pleasing manner surely makes one's arguments themselves seem pleasing because it cloaks them in an aura of reasonableness.

All of us, I think, grasp these facts of life perfectly well as readers, but most of us manage to forget them as writers. Being unconsciously self-oriented, we think it's enough simply to sell. Experience keeps disproving us, though. The reader will always insist on having his needs looked after, as he has every right to, and if they aren't, he'll say "Enough of you" and toss the piece aside.

How, then, do you serve your reader? First, you must cultivate a psychological sense. You must sensitize yourself to what makes you buy—how and why you respond, what makes you feel well served—and gradually you learn to extend that awareness to your reader. This book, incidentally, is as good a place as any to start sensitizing yourself. As you read along, you ought to be asking yourself such questions as: "Is his style too complex to be readable, or too plain, or is it just right—and why?" "What is his tone, and how does he achieve it?" "Do I like it or don't I?" "Why does he use a semicolon here instead of a period?" "Do I like this two-sentence paragraph?" "What effect does his occasional use of contractions have on me?"

A writer eager to improve his psychological sense never simply reads; he reads critically. His mind is always alert to the manner as well as the message, for only in this way will he learn what works and why it works, plus what doesn't work and why it doesn't. He's like one musician listening to the chords and phrasing of another. What's good he'll imitate and make his own.

Once you acquire the habit of reading attentively, you'll find that your psychological sense will improve sharply, and with it your tactical sense too. This will have an immediate impact not only on the effectiveness of your writing but on your attitude toward it as well. You'll discover yourself beginning to relish it as a supreme challenge to your powers of salesmanship. At the same time, you'll find yourself becoming increasingly considerate. The reader's needs, not your own, will dominate your thinking. And it will give you pleasure; you'll quickly learn to enjoy the sense of communion, the fellow-feeling it brings, for, as in a friendship, you'll be in warm, imaginative touch with another human being.

All of this brings us to the second prime way of serving the reader—schooling yourself to be other-oriented. You try to understand your reader. You actively think of him, identify with him, empathize with him. You try to intuit his needs. You train yourself to think always of his convenience, not your own. You treat him exactly as you would wish to be treated, with genuine consideration for his needs and feelings. And you keep reminding yourself, over and over, that good writing is good manners.

There are five specific ways you can serve your reader's needs. Please add them to the list of four essentials of selling that I gave you a minute ago; and as you read them, note how they apply to conversation as well as to writing:

1. Phrase your thoughts clearly so that you're easy to follow.
2. Speak to the point so that you don't waste your reader's time.
3. Anticipate his many questions and responses.
4. Offer him variety and humor to keep him interested.
5. Converse with him in a warm, friendly, open manner instead of pontificating to him like a self-important pedant.

Although I'll be following up on all these points in later chapters, I'd like to expand here on #1, the need for clarity, and #3, the need to anticipate your reader's responses. They will give me an opportunity to explain more concretely the assumptions and actual thought processes of a skilled writer.

Phrase your thoughts clearly

A prose style may be eloquent, lyrical, witty, rhythmical, and fresh as Montana's air, but if it lacks clarity, few readers will stay with it for long. Just as no one enjoys looking at a view, however spectacu-
Jar, through a mud-streaked window, no one enjoys listening to a symphony of words reduced to mere noise.

Hemingway was right: clarity is the indispensable characteristic of good prose. It is the first thing a reader demands, and perhaps the hardest thing for a writer to deliver. It is hard to deliver for two reasons: the individual thoughts must be unambiguous, and, even more challenging, the sequence of those thoughts must be logical. Since the average human mind is not accustomed to thinking in a precise, logical fashion, trying to write clear prose is as fatiguing as water-skiing: you’re using muscles that normally get little exercise, and they soon let you know it.

In writing just as in water-skiing, though, progress does come with practice. And it’s greatly accelerated by imitating the techniques and attitudes of experts. Clear writers, for instance, vary widely in native intelligence, but they all have several basic attitudes in common:

- They assume that their principal object is to communicate. They hope to do more, of course—namely, persuade and give pleasure—but they know that communication must come first if these other effects are ever to be achieved.
- They assume, with a pessimism born of experience, that whatever isn’t plainly stated the reader will invariably misconstrue. They keep in mind that he is, after all, a perfect stranger to their garden of ingenious ideas. In fact, to him that garden may initially resemble a tangled thicket, if not a tropical rain forest. This being so, their job as writer is to guide him through, step by step, so that the experience will be quick and memorable. This involves alertly anticipating his moments of confusion and periodically giving him an explanation of where he’s headed. The Writer’s Golden Rule is the same as the Christian’s: Do unto others.
- They assume that even their profoundest ideas are capable of being expressed clearly. They aren’t so vain as to think that their reflections transcend the powers of language—Shakespeare punctures that fantasy—nor so lazy as to ask their reader to double as a clairvoyant. As novelist Somerset Maugham remarked in The Summing Up:

I have never had much patience with the writers who claim from the reader an effort to understand their meaning. You have only to go to the great philosophers to see that it is possible to express with lucidity the most subtle reflections. You may find it difficult to understand the thought of Hume, and if you have no philosophical training its implications will doubtless escape you; but no one with any education at all can fail to understand exactly what the meaning of each sentence is.

- They have accepted the grim reality that nine-tenths of all writing is rewriting.
- Perhaps most important of all, they are sticklers for continuity. They link their sentences and paragraphs as meticulously as if they were to face criminal charges in the event of negligence.

But rather than speak for them, perhaps I should let a few clear writers speak for themselves. Here, first, is the distinguished British historian, George M. Trevelyan:

The idea that histories which are delightful to read must be the work of superficial temperaments, and that a crabbed style betokens a deep thinker or conscientious worker, is the reverse of the truth. What is easy to read has been difficult to write. The labor of writing and rewriting, correcting and recorrecting, is the due exacted by every good book from its author. . . . The easily flowing connection of sentence with sentence and paragraph with paragraph has always been won by the sweat of the brow.

And now novelist James A. Michener:

I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I’m one of the world’s great rewriters.

And finally E. B. White, perhaps America’s most respected essayist, whose consistently graceful style entitles him to have the last word:

The main thing I try to do is write as clearly as I can. Because I have the greatest respect for the reader, and if he’s going to the trouble of reading what I’ve written—I’m a slow reader myself and I guess most
people are—why, the least I can do is make it as easy as possible for him to find out what I’m trying to say, trying to get at. I rewrite a good deal to make it clear.

Anticipate your reader’s responses

The chief difficulty with writing is that it’s a one-way process. You can’t see your reader’s face, you can’t hear him, you can’t get any feedback from him whatsoever. The novice writer, as we have seen, is oblivious to this handicap. The skilled writer, though, is supersensitive to it; but he overcomes it by actively imagining a reader—in fact, imagining many different readers—just as an experienced TV newscaster, looking into the camera’s unwinking eye, actively imagines a viewer.

The kind of reader (or readers) that a skilled writer imagines will depend, of course, on the occasion, the kind of piece he’s writing, and other such factors. But whatever the occasion, he’ll always imagine that the reader has many other interesting things to do with his time, is reading at a fast clip, and is just waiting for an excuse to tune out. The writer’s challenge, then, is to avoid giving the reader his excuse.

How does the writer meet those challenges? Principally by empathy. The whole time he’s writing, he’s constantly switching back and forth from his own mind to the mind of his reader. Like a skilled chess player, he makes a dozen mental moves for every actual one. Each of them he tests with respect to the probable response it will elicit. Anticipation, he’s learned, is the name of the game. If he can anticipate a response, he has a fair chance of controlling it. So every sentence—every sentence—receives a regular battery of challenges like these:

"Am I treating him as if he were an idiot?"
"Is there any conceivable way that this sentence might confuse him?"
"Have I just used any of these words in the preceding sentences?"
"Will this phrase strike him as pretentious? And, honestly, am I using it only to impress him, or is this the only way I can express the thought cleanly?"
"Will he get the subtle nuance here, or did I better spell it out?"
"How might this offend his feelings?"
"Can he jump on me for verbosity here?"
"Will he hear a strongly conversational, living voice coming through here, or am I beginning to sound like a book?"

He’s equally watchful about the way he paragraphs. He remembers all too well the number of times he’s encountered whale-like paragraphs that left him sinking under their weight, not to mention those mini-paragraphs that had his eye bouncing crazily down the page. Too much or too little in a paragraph has the same effect: it wears the reader out. This he keeps reminding himself. He’s also watchful of the continuity between his paragraphs. "Is the connection perfectly clear?" he asks himself. "Will my reader want an even sturdier bridge between these parts of my argument?" "Is there any conceivable way he can feel disoriented here?"

And so on, and so on. Writing well is a long exercise in second-guessing and empathizing—even a kind of non-neurotic, self-induced paranoia. It puts a premium on social sensitivity, alertness, and simple goodwill. It is, in short, a very complicated business. But, like mountain-climbing, it’s also wonderfully challenging. Rewarding, too. When you’ve genuinely communicated with another person, when you’ve persuaded him to accept a new viewpoint, and when the whole learning experience has been fun for him because you made it fun for him, that’s downright satisfying—hell, it’s exhilarating.

Some concluding thoughts

1 Mumbo jumbo is another word for grunts of the mind. Mumbo jumbo is what comes out in first and second drafts when you are still writing basically for yourself—that is, when you are still trying to fathom
what you think about a subject. Novelist E. M. Forster expressed the problem well: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"

2 Once you've finished writing for yourself and begin to write for your reader, your mumbo jumbo will start slowly turning into bona fide prose—i.e., sentences that make sense.

3 If your reader can't get your full meaning on a single reading, however—and a single reading is all he owes you—you must face up to the fact that you are still afflicted with residuals of mumbo jumbo.

4 The best remedy for residuals of mumbo jumbo is the same as the best remedy for an acute case of mumbo jumbo: shorter words and shorter sentences.

5 When you finally think you've finished a piece, reread it twice. first through the eyes of a nonliterary person (for unconscious obscurities) and second through the eyes of your worst enemy (for all other lapses). This tends to have a nicely chilling effect on overheated and underthought prose.

6 As a last caution, let the piece stand overnight. Then, in the morning, do as the professional author does and share it with a candid friend. Tell him, "I'm interested in seeing this thing improved, not approved"—and mean it. As reinforcement, it might help both of you if you quote him a remark George Bernard Shaw once made to his friend, actress Ellen Terry. Miss Terry had confessed her reluctance to deface the manuscript of a play he had sent her for criticism. Shaw wrote back to her:

Oh, bother the MSS., mark them as much as you like: what else are they for? Mark everything that strikes you. I may consider a thing fortynine times; but if you consider it, it will be considered 50 times; and a line 50 times considered is 2 per cent better than a line 49 times considered. And it is the final 2 per cent that makes the difference between excellence and mediocrity.

The chances are that you have been in David's shoes yourself. His confusion is typical. He's been hearing the phrase "critical analysis" for years now but it's still just gobblledygook to him. No one has ever bothered to explain to him precisely what it involves. As far as he can figure, the whole business is circular. How, he wants to know, can you analyze a story without discussing the plot? But if you discuss the plot, it seems you're immediately guilty of "plot summary." It's like Catch-22, he decides.

Actually it isn't, although it may seem that way. An analogy may help dispel some of the fog surrounding the two terms. The difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis is analogous to the difference between (a) an account of the highlights of the Vietnam War and (b) an explanation of how the United States happened to get into it, why we stayed in it, and what its effects have been on us. A plot summary begins with no thesis or point of view; it merely re-

### 3 How to write a critical analysis

A writer's job is sticking his neck out.  

SLOAN WILSON

The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea.  

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Teacher: This first paragraph reads like a plot summary, David, not a critical analysis. And so does this next one. David, you want to be analyzing.

David: Well, I thought I was analyzing.

Teacher: But you're merely giving the reader the story here.

David: Well, the reader's got to know what happens, doesn't he?
capitulates the facts. A critical analysis, on the other hand, takes a viewpoint and attempts to prove its validity; its object is to help the reader make better sense of something he is already familiar with.

"Something he is already familiar with" holds the all-important assumption. If you look again at David's last comment—"Well, the reader's got to know what happens, doesn't he?"—you'll note that he's been operating from a quite different assumption, an assumption of ignorance. From ninth grade onward he was taught: "Never assume that your reader is familiar with your subject." While this may be sound advice to writers of book reports, it's fatal to apprentice critics, not to mention their hapless readers. The critic's job is to explain and evaluate—that is, to bring his reader to a better understanding of his subject. Plainly, he can't do this if he assumes that his reader is completely ignorant.

Knowing what you can and should assume is not enough, however. You'll still slip into plot summarizing if you neglect to formulate an interesting, gutsy thesis. Novelist Sloan Wilson's remark couldn't be more on target: "A writer's job is sticking his neck out." If you don't stick your neck out, your essay won't have a strong thesis; and if it lacks a strong thesis, you'll have nothing to assert, hence nothing to substantiate. Since nothing can come of nothing, your sole recourse will be to summarize large sections of the plot under the guise of "analyzing" it.

If, on the other hand, you muster the courage and perceptiveness to formulate a strong position on your subject, you're already well on the way toward a genuine critical analysis, since you have obliged yourself to offer the careful argumentation required to make your position convincing. This normally entails ranging back and forth through the plot in pursuit of textual evidence. In the process, of course, you'll find yourself drawing on many details of the plot, as Pauline Kael does in the reviews quoted earlier, but unlike the mechanical plot summarizer, you will always be using those details to demonstrate a point. In other words, it is their larger significance that always concerns you, not the details for their own sake. They are illustrations of something—a recurring pattern, a character trait, or whatever.

David might interrupt here: "OK, I follow you, but how do I come up with that 'genuinely interesting, gutsy thesis' you talk about? I always have trouble thinking up things to write about."

Answer: As you read, and later as you prepare to write, get in the habit of thinking in terms of how and why questions. These are the questions that a critical analysis usually deals with. They are more intrinsically interesting than what questions because they are interpretive rather than dryly descriptive. But, equally important, they are more likely to stimulate fresh ideas. Here are some examples:

"How is Hamlet like Horatio—and unlike him?"
"Why does Hamlet delay his promised revenge?"
"Why is the play-within-a-play scene pivotal?"
"How does King Claudius win over the enraged Laertes?"

Well-reasoned answers to questions such as these make for exciting reading because they help the reader to see clearly what before he had seen only dimly, if at all. And thinking out answers to such questions makes for exciting writing because it involves discovery.

Another suggestion: Pay close attention to the form of the work. One of the chief goals of critical analysis, said the poet W. H. Auden, is to "throw light on the process of artistic 'Making.' "

If the work is a poem, for example, you might begin by analyzing the rhyme scheme and ask yourself how it reinforces the poem's content, thematic movement, etc. Look, too, at the punctuation for what it may reveal. (You may assume that very little is accidental in a poem.) It's also helpful to ponder these three questions:

1. What is the emotional effect of the poem?
2. How does it get its emotional power—that is, how does the poet manage to make us respond the way we do?
3. How does the poem give us a sense of wholeness (i.e., completed emotion or effect)?

If it's a play, begin by paying close attention to the opening scene, which usually strikes many of the major themes. Also, analyze each scene in relation to the scenes immediately preceding and following
It. Adjacent scenes frequently point up ironies, significant contrasts, and the like. Further, be alert to repeated words and phrases, stage directions, and characters' names (often symbolic or ironic).

If it's a novel, start by analyzing it in terms of beginning, middle, and end to get a clearer sense of its movement. Ask yourself what each chapter accomplishes. Read closely the initial description of the various characters for clues to their essence, and be alert to verbal signatures in their speeches. Look for repeated words and images. Ponder especially well the final paragraph: what kind of concluding statement does it make?

For further suggestions, you might consult A Short Guide to Writing About Literature by Sylvan Barnet and Writing Themes About Literature by Edgar Roberts, both in paperback. If you want inspiration as well as instruction, I suggest you go directly to the master critics themselves. I'd recommend, for starters, Pauline Kael's books (there are five, at this writing) and John Mason Brown's superb collection of theater reviews, Dramatis Personae. Reading them is like hitching a cross-country ride in Mario Andretti's Ferrari.

One other question concerns tenses. In analyzing works of literature and film, novice writers often employ the past tense. Experienced critics, however, almost invariably use the present tense. This is partly because of the force of convention and partly because dramatic characters are considered as "alive" now as when they were first conceived. Thus, say "Hamlet is," not "Hamlet was." The convention usually applies to authors, too: say "Keats observes," not "Keats observed." Here are two exceptions to the rule, though: (1) If you wish to refer to something that occurred earlier than the time span covered by the play or novel, use the past tense. Examples: "Hamlet and Horatio were school chums at Wittenberg." "Reared in the aristocratic home of General Gabler, Hedda was taught to value propriety at all costs." (2) If you wish to refer to something that has occurred before the thing you are now discussing but still within the time span of the work, use the present perfect tense. Example: "Although Hamlet has declared his readiness to avenge his father's murder, he seems here to betray a strong repugnance to the deed."

In closing, it might be helpful if I take the major points of this chapter and recast them in the form of working assumptions for you:

1. Assume that your basic audience is a well-informed reader, not the ignorant world.
2. Assume that since your reader is already familiar with the text you are discussing, he will be bored with commonplace perceptions—as you yourself would be—and will feel insulted if you retell him the plot.
3. Assume that he prefers reading arguments to mere chat, and that he won't really begin reading with interest until he sees you courageously crawling out on an interpretive limb—like this: "Love Story will not be the first disgraceful movie that has laid waste the emotions of a vast audience, though it may be one of the most ineptly made of all the lump-and-phlegm hits" (Pauline Kael).