

**College Composition**  
**The Essay and “Thinking Moves”**

Adapted from a teaching demonstration by Dr. Robert Brooke, Professor of English, UN-L

**The Problem:**

How do we as writers understand the difference between the “school essay” which is required for us in order to show our teachers we have the knowledge and competence to write an essay when in reality, most essay writing published today by contemporary writers looks very different (where the essay is a vibrant, open, thinking form, linked to exploration and discovery)?

**Goals:**

- To help writers find excitement and enjoyment in writing essays through emphasizing “essaying” as a process that may lead to a variety of finished forms;
- To help writers imagine “thinking moves” that will allow them to explore ideas more deeply in the process of generating essays;
- To help writers craft “thinking moves” as transitional moments between sections of their essay-in-process;
- To help writers consider the effect of their “thinking moves” on their readers, thus sharpening their understanding of purpose and audience in their work.

**Thinking Moves:**

*An essay, as both a thinking process and a structured product, is a series of “thinking moves” the writer applies to a topic of inquiry. The “thinking moves” guide both writer and reader in understanding the selected topic. For the writer, “thinking moves” provide a process of active thinking, during both idea generation and revision. For the reader, carefully constructed “thinking moves” guide the reader to a richer understanding through a sense of shared inquiry, thereby providing a gentler kind of persuasion than explicit thesis/support.*

**Steps in the Activity:**

- 1) Start with a topic or an idea you’ve been writing about (for now, the form doesn’t matter—steal it from anything you’ve written so far).
- 2) Try writing for 10 minutes from one of the “thinking moves” identified by Dr. Brooke’s Essay class.
- 3) If that’s going great, write for another 5-7 minutes. Otherwise, try writing a transition into a second “thinking move” from the list for 5-7 minutes.
- 4) Share with a partner what you just wrote in class (5 minutes)
- 5) Summarize for yourself
  - \*What happened for you as you tried these?
  - \*What will you try next?

## Four Thinking Moves for Essays From Spring 2007 Rhetoric: The Essay class

**Locating Your Experience in Broader Cultural Experience:** Move your thinking from your own personal experience to its location within the wider culture's experience with the same issue.

Example (from Scott Russell Sanders, "Under the Influence"): "I am forty two as I write these words, and I know full well now that my father was an alcoholic, a man consumed by disease rather than by disappointment. What had seemed to me a private grief is in fact a public scourge. In the United States alone some ten or fifteen million people share his ailment, and behind the doors they slam in fury or disgrace, countless other children tremble. I comfort myself with such knowledge, holding it against the throb of memory like an ice pack against a bruise."

**Explore the "myths" for your topic especially prevalent in your culture:** Move your thinking by choosing to describe a dominant way of understanding your topic, clearing a space for you to go on to explore other ways of understanding it.

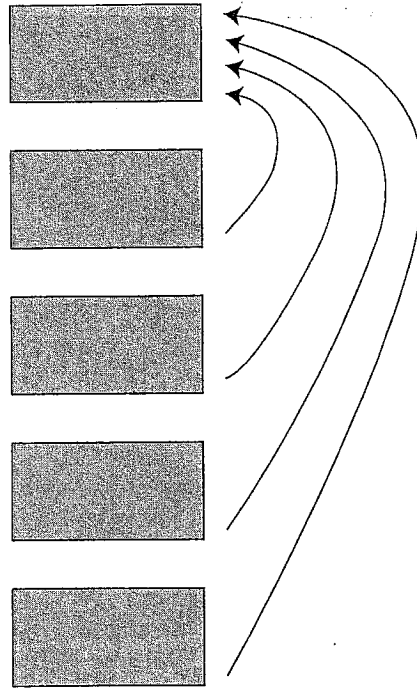
Example (again from Scott Russell Sanders, "Under the Influence"): "While growing up on the back roads and in the country schools and cramped Methodist churches of Ohio and Tennessee, I never heard the word *alcoholism*, never happened across it in books or magazines. . . . [W]e had no way of understanding Father's drinking except as an act of will, a deliberate folly or cruelty, a moral weakness, a sin. . . . Our neighborhood was high on the Bible, and the Bible was hard on drunkards {leading to four pages of exploration of biblical portrayals of drinking}."

**Name the "real" issue:** Move your thinking by suggesting what the "real issue" is for you in what you are writing, and then writing to explain it. (We noticed that many writers use this device over and over in their essays, and their understanding of the "real issue" for them changes and develops.)

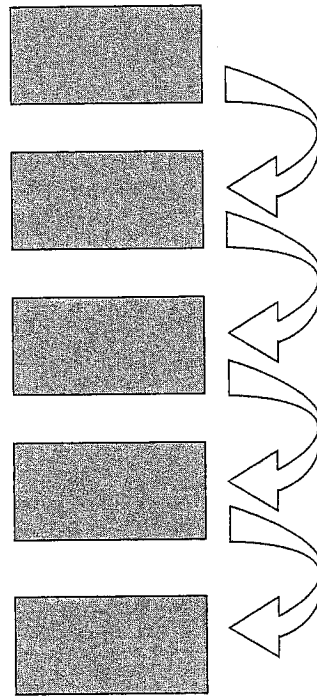
Example: (from Joan Didion, "Goodbye to All That"): "In retrospect it seems to me that those days before I knew the names of all the bridges were happier than the ones that came later, but perhaps you will see that as you go along. Part of what I want to tell you is what it is like to be young in New York, how six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and old-fashioned trick shots—the Seagram Building fountains dissolve into snowflakes, I enter a revolving door at twenty one and come out a good deal older, and on a different street. But most particularly I want to explain to you, and in the process perhaps to myself, why I no longer live in New York."

**Project the Imagination:** Move your thinking by fully imagining a scene you have observed or heard about, fleshing it out so it becomes an exploration for your topic. (We noticed this "thinking move" all over, from whole essays that did this {Charles Lamb's "Dream Children: A Reverie" and Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting"} to selected crucial moments, like Sanders' imagining the moment when his dad started drinking again after several years of sobriety).

**Figure 2.1.** Structure of the Thesis/Supporting Point Essay



**Figure 2.2.** Structure of the Periodic Essay with Subordinate Modification



The internal structure of advanced essays, both familiar and academic, can be characterized as a progression of ideas, introduced and interwoven as the essay progresses. These introductions and interweavings consist of a number of turning points, surprises, twists—moments when the essay's established thinking is added to, revised, called into question, problematized, or transcended in some way. When professional writers make these turns, they do so with rhetorical emphasis, by shaping sentences and paragraphs that are designed to frame the turn in a rhetorically powerful way, so that it is clear to the reader not only that the writer's thinking is *moving*, but that it is moving in a particular, intended direction. Turns in thinking, and the rhetorical shapes that house them, though distinguishable from one another, occur simultaneously. They organize the essay, guiding readers through a careful choreography that displays each new idea as flowing from those that have come before. We call this double motion, this intersection of powerful thinking and rhetoric, a *thinking move*.

# *Critical Passages*

TEACHING THE TRANSITION  
TO COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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Foreword by David Bartholomae



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