



Unit 1 Ideas

By now, you're experienced enough as a writer to know that writing is mostly about ideas. The thing about ideas, though, is that they can be like plain, unworked cookie dough. Plain old cookie dough, sitting there doing nothing, is just the beginning. The dough has potential, of course. Eventually, you can make cookies from the dough, but you have to work at it. You have to cut, shape, and bake the cookie dough. Finally, when the cookies are done, you can arrange them on a plate. In a sense, this is the process your ideas go through to become a focused piece of writing. They must be worked and shaped to become a final product.

This unit is about planning your writing so that your ideas interest your reader. You'll learn about

- ◆ two prewriting techniques (drawing and listing details)
- ◆ narrowing your topic
- ◆ turning unclear writing into focused writing
- ◆ using details to hold the reader's attention

Draw on the Count of Three

Writers do a lot of things to warm up, or “prewrite.” Some writers discuss ideas with friends. Some writers make lists. Some writers even draw pictures. Now, you may not think of yourself as an artist, but drawing is a great way to kick-start your thinking. So once you have a topic in mind, drawing can help you think of details you didn’t even know were in your head.

Getting Off to an Energetic Start

For many writers, finding a topic is the hardest part of the writing process. It’s easier when you care about the topic, have something definite to say, and feel confident about your knowledge. It’s also easier to choose a topic when you’ve done some prewriting. Consider this example topic: “Fun in the Great Outdoors.” First, imagine what you would write about this topic. Then, answer the following questions.

What image do you get when you think of “fun in the great outdoors”?

Write it here: _____

name: date:

1. Do you think everyone in your class would think of the same thing? Yes No

2. Consider this list—boating, hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, birdwatching, cycling, rafting, sailing, rock climbing, skateboarding. Does it cover everything you would need to write about the topic? Yes No

3. Would you be ready to write about this topic without any further thought? Yes No

You probably answered **No** to that last question, and that's OK. What you need is a prewriting strategy to help you warm up.

Picture It in Your Head—Then, Draw It on Paper

Go back to your answer to the question, "What image do you get when you think of 'fun in the great outdoors'?" Use the space below to draw a quick and simple picture of what popped into your head, such as people, places, actions, and weather.

name: date:

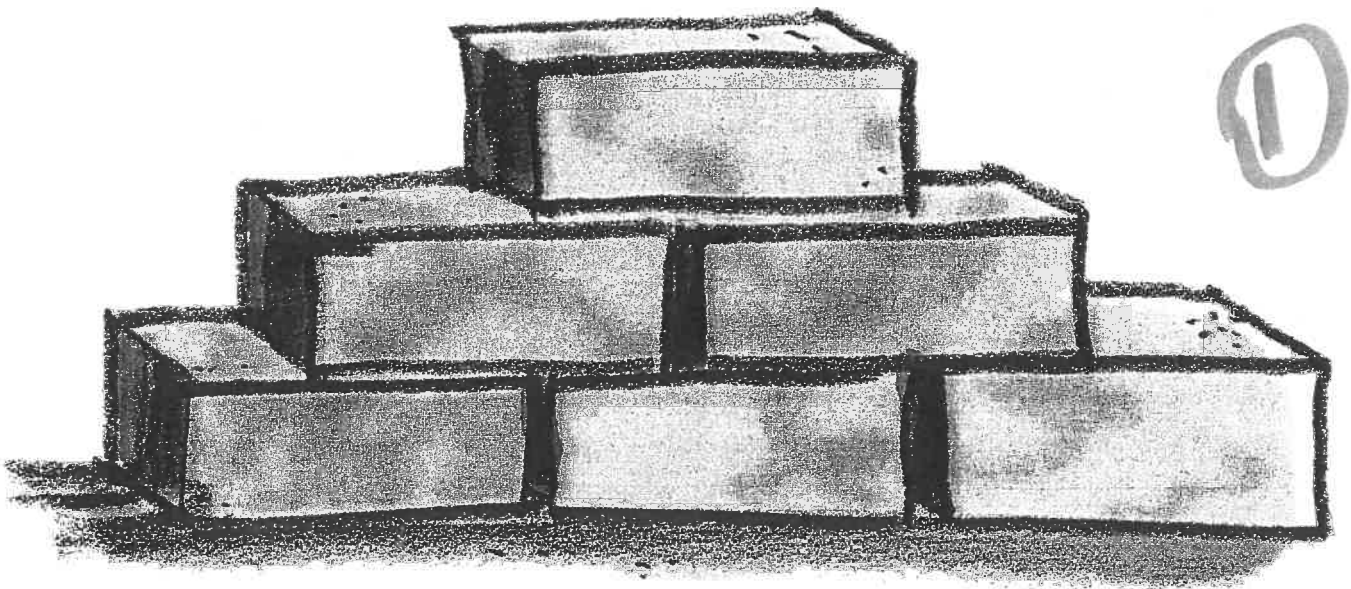
Look closely at your picture. Here are some things for you to think about: What kinds of details did you include? Does your picture show a specific place on a specific day? Did you include people? Who are they? What are they doing? What's the weather like? Use the space below to give your picture a title that describes what your picture is generally about. (Examples—*Trout Fishing on Timothy Lake, Central Park in Winter, Antelope Hunting After School*)

Title: _____

Do you know what you have just done? You've helped bring your topic into focus, and you've recorded some important details you'll need to create a clear picture for your readers. Before you write, though, here's another important step—thinking about the supporting details. This time, we'll use a connected but slightly different prewriting strategy.

Labeling the Bricks (Another Prewriting Trick)

Think of all the details you put into your drawing as the bricks you use to build a big idea for your readers. Label the bricks in your stack with a few key words that tell about important parts of your picture. There are six bricks to help you keep the topic manageable. Try to fill all six. (Yes, you can add more bricks if you need them.)



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Build It for Your Readers

It's now time to use those detail bricks to build a piece of writing. Look at your title and your stack of bricks. Which brick holds the most interesting detail? That brick will provide a good place to begin. On a separate sheet of paper, turn those brick details into sentences that make word pictures for your audience.

Share and Compare

Share your writing with a partner. Listen carefully for specific details that relate to your partner's title.

A Writer's Question

Do you think drawing a picture and then creating a stack of detail bricks are steps you could do by yourself? (Remember, it's *not* important how well you can draw; it's important to use drawing to help you think through your idea.)

- _____ I had trouble drawing everything I pictured in my head.
- _____ I still need practice, but I think I can do this. A picture made it easier to write.
- _____ I found drawing pretty simple; I'm ready to use this on my own.



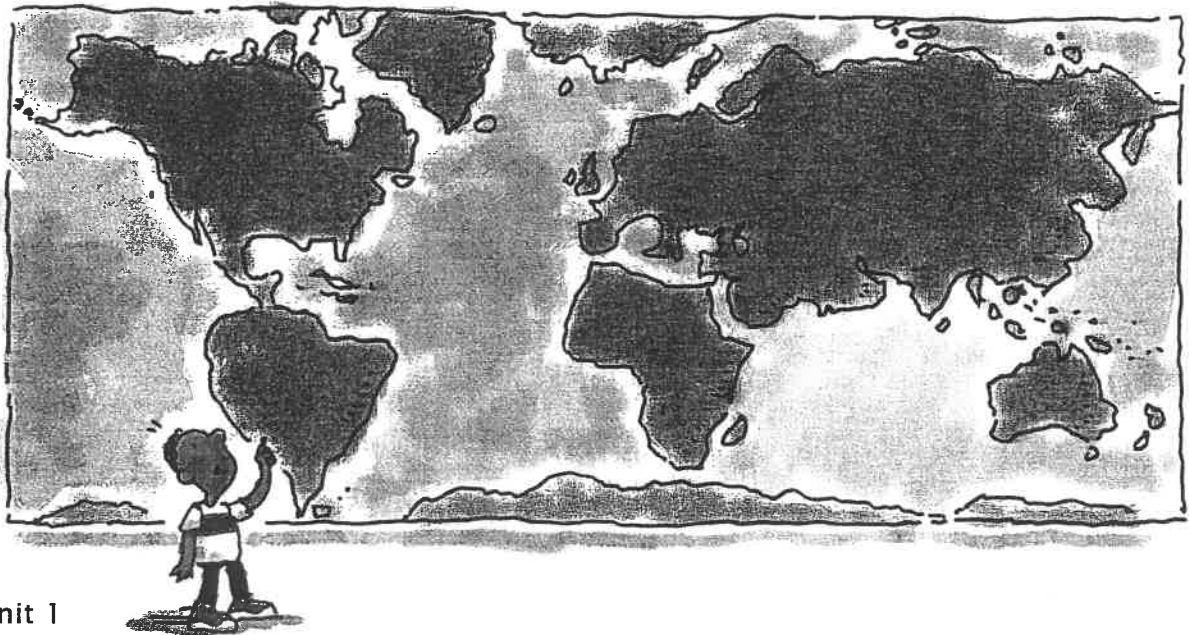
Lesson

2

name: date:

Narrowing Your Topic

Did you ever get one of those writing assignments that just seemed so huge? For example, “Sports” or “History of the Western United States”? If you’re like most writers, you found that big topic hard to manage. Surprisingly, many young writers assign themselves big topics like these—even when they have a choice. Working with a too-big topic makes getting started very frustrating. It’s like trying to find a street in Riverton, Wyoming, by looking at a map of the world.



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name: date:

Listening to Your Inner Navigator

Writers need to ask themselves questions. As a writer, you can narrow a big topic by talking to your inner navigator. Use questions that start with these basic words: **Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, and Which.** Your answers will take you from a big, sprawling topic to one that's manageable. Here's an example:

Which Way to Topicville?

Topic: Sports

Inner Navigator: **What** do you really want to say about sports?

Writer's Answer: I want to say that I'd rather play a sport than watch one.

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No

Topic: Sports I can play

Inner Navigator: OK, **which** sports are your favorites?

Writer's Answer: Well, any team sports played outside.

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No

Topic: Team sports I can play outside

Inner Navigator: **What** particular outdoor team sport do you like?

Writer's Answer: Lacrosse.

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No
(But we're close!)

Topic: Lacrosse

Inner Navigator: **What** do you like about lacrosse?

Writer's Answer: There is quite a lot to like—the action, the equipment, the history, and it's really fun.

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No
(But the good news is we're only one question away!)

Topic: Things I like best about the game of Lacrosse

Inner Navigator: **Which** one of those things—action, equipment, history, fun—do you most want to write about?

Writer's Answer: I think I'll start with the history of the sport and how it was first played by Native Americans.

Have we arrived in Topicville? X Yes No
(Absolutely!)

Final topic: Linking Lacrosse to Native American Culture

You're the Navigator, So You Ask the Questions

Where do "inner navigator" questions come from? They come from you, of course. So it's time now to grab the map, ask the questions, and steer yourself to Topicville. When you think you've reached Topicville, write your final topic on the line provided.

Some Navigating Tips: Start with a general topic (such as *food, pets, school*). Then, begin asking yourself some questions—**What** would I want everyone to know about this topic? **What** is it I really like about this topic? You may be able to drive into Topicville after only 1 or 2 questions, or you might need 5 or 6. Use as many questions as you need.

Topic: _____

Inner Navigator's Question: _____

Writer's Answer: _____

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No

Topic: _____

Inner Navigator's Question: _____

Writer's Answer: _____

Are we in Topicville yet? Yes No

Topic: _____

Inner Navigator's Question: _____

Writer's Answer: _____

Are we in Topicville yet? _____ Yes _____ No

Topic: _____

Inner Navigator's Question: _____

Writer's Answer: _____

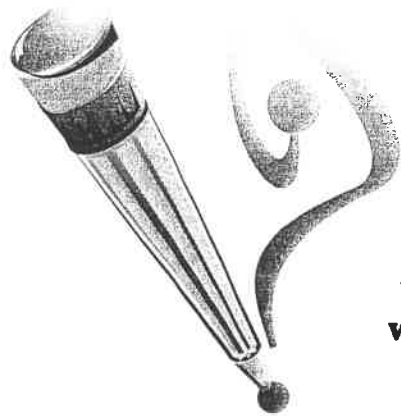
Are we in Topicville yet? _____ Yes _____ No

Topic: _____

Inner Navigator's Question: _____

Writer's Answer: _____

Are we in Topicville yet? _____ Yes _____ No



A Writer's Question

What are the benefits for you as the writer and your audience if you try to narrow your topic before you get too far into the writing?

Benefits for the Writer	Benefits for the Audience

From Fuzzy to Focused

Suppose a friend asked you this question: “Would you mind getting that thing down from the whatchamacallit, checking it out, then putting the old whosiewhatsit in that other space-like area?” Would you have *any* idea what you were supposed to do? Chances are you’d be quite surprised to learn that your friend wanted you to help move a piano from an upstairs apartment, tune it, then load it onto a truck. As that out-of-tune piano sat in the apartment, you’d be scratching your head in the hallway, wondering what on earth your friend was trying to say. As a writer, you can leave your reader scratching his or her head, too—if you use fuzzy language and forget the details. Don’t worry, though—you can transform fuzzy writing into focused writing.

Sharing an Example: Esperanza Rising

Let’s take a look at a passage from Pam Muñoz Ryan’s book. Notice how she provides details of characters and actions to describe the scene.

Papa handed Esperanza the knife. The short blade curved like a scythe, its fat wooden handle fitting snugly in her palm. This job was usually reserved for the

eldest son of a wealthy rancher, but since Esperanza was an only child and Papa's pride and glory, she was always given the honor. Last night she had watched Papa sharpen the knife back and forth across a stone, so she knew the tool was edged like a razor.

"*Cuidate los dedos,*" said Papa. "Watch your fingers."

. . . The clusters were heavy on the vine and ready to deliver. Esperanza's parents, Ramona and Sixto Ortega, stood nearby, Mama, tall and elegant, her hair in the usual braided wreath that crowned her head, and Papa, barely taller than Mama, his graying mustache twisted up at the sides. He swept his hand toward the grapevines, signaling Esperanza. When she walked toward the arbors and glanced back at her parents, they both smiled and nodded, encouraging her forward. When she reached the vines, she separated the leaves and carefully grasped a thick stem. She put the knife to it, and with a quick swipe, the heavy cluster of grapes dropped into her waiting hand. Esperanza walked back to Papa and handed him the fruit. Papa kissed it and held it up for all to see.



"¡La cosecha!" said Papa. "Harvest!"

Pam Muñoz Ryan, *Esperanza Rising*. (New York: Scholastic, 2000), pp. 4-6

What Can You See?

The author, Pam Muñoz Ryan, creates a clear picture for her readers. True, you may still have some questions, but the author has already told you a lot about the characters and events of the story. What specific words did the author use to paint this picture? Complete the chart with specific words from the passage that helped put a picture in your mind.

knife	<i>short blade . . .</i>
Esperanza	
Mama	
Papa	
grapes	
importance of cutting grapes	

Share and Compare

Share your chart with several classmates. As you see and hear what others wrote, feel free to add any details you may have missed.

What Did the Author Do?

What if Pam Muñoz Ryan had written these sentences in place of the passage above:

Her father handed her the knife. She cut the grapes and handed them to him.

What is missing in this new, shorter version? Put a check by anything you feel is missing.

- clear, precise word choice _____
- clear, descriptive phrases _____
- things I can picture in my mind _____
- setting or character details _____
- sensory details _____

There's a good chance you checked more than one item from the list. Why? Because the things on the list are the very things writers use to create clear pictures for readers. The "revised" version does not do that. This time, let's start with a piece of fuzzy writing, and you can add the details.

From Fuzzy to Focused in a Flash

This piece of fuzzy writing needs your help. Read it once. Then close your eyes and try to picture what the author is writing about. When you have done that, read it again with a pencil in your hand. Circle any words that should be replaced. Make notes in the margins to remind yourself what details should be added. Finally, revise the writing as you see fit, moving it from fuzzy to focused.

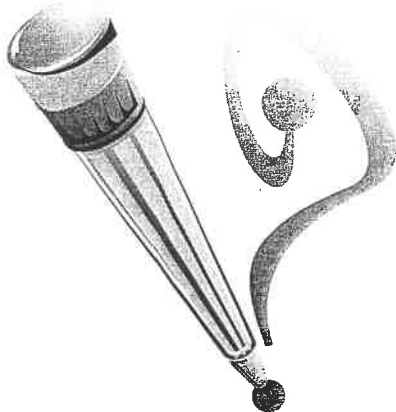
Fuzzy Writing:

This time his car broke down on the road. The weather was bad, and he would have to walk. He was going to be late for work, and his boss would be mad. He felt pretty bad.

Focused Writing:

A Writer's Question

Look back at your revision, and check each of the following changes that matches something you did to improve the writing.

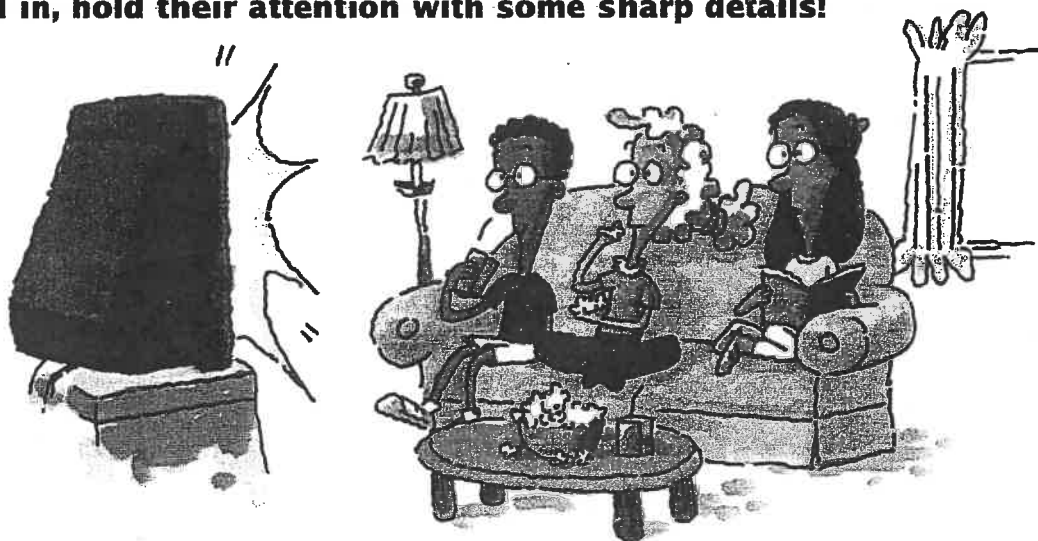


- I changed some words to make the writing clearer.
- I added sensory details (sights, sounds, smells, feelings).
- I added dialogue.
- I added descriptive writing to make a picture in the reader's mind.
- I added some strong verbs.

Put a *second check* by each kind of change you think you might try in the future.

That's Pretty Sketchy!

Have you ever had a television show interrupted by a news report? The announcer teases you with a hint of a big news story then leaves you hanging with the promise of "More to come later!" Of course, the television network hopes the audience will stay tuned. Some might, but many viewers will grow bored and change the channel or turn off the television. Without really meaning to, writers sometimes force their audiences to make similar choices about "staying tuned." If a piece of writing is too sketchy, a reader may have to work too hard to fill in the blank spots. Some readers aren't willing to make the effort, so they just tune out. If you want to keep your audience tuned in, hold their attention with some sharp details!



"Stay Tuned" or "Change Channels"?

Read the following samples. As you read, try to visualize the writer's idea. Are you getting a clear picture? Or is the writer's idea still too sketchy? Decide whether you would "stay tuned" (that is, keep reading the piece) or whether you would "change channels" and give up on it. Then, in the space provided after each sample, mark your choice and briefly describe the reasons behind your choice.



My Dog

I live in a tall apartment building in a big city. The elevator ride usually leaves my stomach feeling wobbly. We're allowed to have pets, but there are a lot of rules about what we can and can't do. I have to be careful. I have a dog. I've always loved dogs, and my dog is special. In my apartment building, there are all kinds of pets including snakes, ferrets, cats, and fish. Almost everyone loves my dog.

How do you feel? Check one.

- Way too sketchy—change channels now!
- I'll give it a minute—it might get better.
- I'll definitely stay tuned. This story is terrific!

My Thoughts (reasons for your choice):



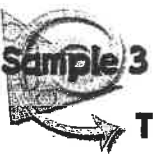
All About My Brother

Tanner is my brother. Actually, he's my younger brother. I can't call him my little brother, because he's almost as tall as I am. He's got red hair and glasses, and a cast on his arm. I guess I'm partly responsible for the cast. Tanner is always hungry; he eats more than I do. He's really good at playing computer games, which is his favorite thing to do after school.

How do you feel? Check one.

- I'm bored—change channels now!
- I'll give it a minute—this could improve any second.
- I'll definitely stay tuned. This story is a winner!

My Thoughts:



The Secret Woods

The last time we were at the beach, my mom and I hiked along a trail we always take. Suddenly, though, where we usually go left, for some reason we headed right. To the left were these awesome, rolling sand dunes; to the right was the great unknown, at least to us. The trail followed the ridge of this sandy hill, then cut sharply down to a thick, dark grove of trees we had never noticed before. All along the trail were deer tracks—and another animal track we did not recognize. Some of the tracks seemed very fresh.

We hesitated a moment at the edge of the trees and then followed the tracks inside. The first thing we noticed was how eerily quiet it was. We couldn't even hear the ocean anymore.

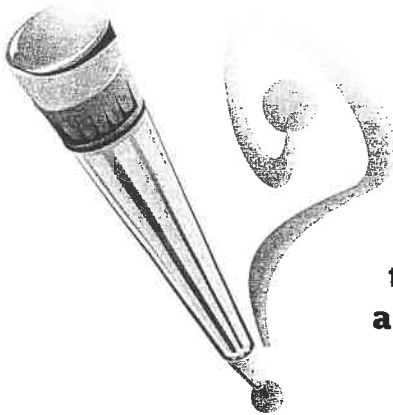
How do you feel? Check one.

- This is putting me to sleep—change channels now!
- I'm not giving up just yet—I see a glimmer of hope.
- I'm definitely staying tuned. I want to see what happens next.

My Thoughts:

Time to Revise

Select one of the two samples that you rated as being "too sketchy." Revise it to include the details needed to make the main idea clear and well supported.



A Writer's Question

How do writers invite readers inside their ideas and keep them tuned in? Write down three specific things you or your partner did as you revised.