2. Forming Concepts

Making Statements

Language can express ("Ouch!") and indicate ("There it is."), but its chief function is to give form to feelings and ideas, which it does by representing them, by re-presenting them. The form of language finds the form of thought and feeling; those forms then find further language. By re-presenting our thoughts and feelings, we make meaning.

Thinking is implicit in the very act of naming. Every time you name something *A*, you are simultaneously seeing its relationship to something else; you are differentiating and classifying. If it is *A*, it is therefore not *Not-A;* if it is *A*, then it must

be recognized as a *kind* of thing. The most important fact about language is that we identify and classify at the same time. Naming means identifying, which is inconceivable without classifying. You tell what something *is* by seeing what it's *like*, what it goes with. Naming involves, simultaneously, the identification of a thing and the recognition of the *kind* of thing it is. As soon as we say, "This is a tree," we imply, "This is the kind of thing a tree is." A *kind* is a *class*. This is the reason for saying that naming both creates chaos and discovers the way out of chaos. As you figure out how one thing is related to another, how one name is related to another, seeing how things and words can be grouped, you are necessarily comparing and differentiating, deciding in which respects they are similar and in which they are dissimilar.

You don't have to learn to do this: you're born knowing how; it's the way your mind works. But as a student of composition, you have to learn how to put those natural facilities to work in organizing names into sentences and sentences into paragraphs. Here, again, you don't have to invent the means because the structure of language itself is what allows you to get from name to name. It's the discursive character of language —its tendency to "run along," which is what *discursive* means, gathering words to words, attaching groups to groups—which allows you to make meanings and thus to order chaos. When it comes to writing, you compose statements that represent your thinking; in the process, you are making meanings. Both the way you think and the way language works make that possible: language is a form that finds thought, and thought is a form that finds language. That is the dialectic of composing.

You've seen how a chaos of names can be organized by substantiating the terms of the question HDWDWW? and by developing oppositions that represent the relationships you see between various names. The next step out of chaos is developing your specifications and oppositions as statements. A statement predicates, i.e., it says something about something. You make statements by composing sentences about agent, action, manner, and purpose. Unless all of those sentences are to take the form of simple assertions, *This-is-that,* you will need a repertory of syntactical structures—sentence patterns. The reason for having sentence patterns on hand is not to have "variety" but to provide yourself with linguistic forms that can help find conceptual and expressive forms. A repertory of sentence patterns provides you with ways of putting meanings together. Knowing several ways of stating comparisons, for instance, can help you

identify comparable ideas; knowing that a semicolon lets you juxtapose a particular name and a general name can help you find such names.

Note that punctuation marks indicate the syntactical relationships—the way the parts of the pattern are put together. They are ways of signaling what kind of relationships to expect. Here, then, are five patterns that can form the core of your repertory:

1. A structure for listing and renaming. (The items listed can be in the form of single words or groups of words.)

   _____, _____, _____: _____.

   Lively, beautiful, sad: Western Ireland is never more inviting than when it seems forbidding.

2. A structure to relate condition and result, cause and effect.

   If _____, then _____.

   If chaos is thought of as a source, then it is less frightening to the composer.

3. A structure for articulating a comparison with a difference.

   Just as _____, so _____;
   but if you consider _____, then _____
   _____.

   Just as soap operas feature stereotypes, so Chekhov in his stories develops types; but if you consider how individualized they are, then you can see that it isn't the types but what you do with them that makes the difference.

   Just as harpsichords have keyboards and a set of strings, so pianos are also keyboard instruments; but if you consider the manner in which the sound is produced, then you can account for the difference in sound.

4. A structure for stating differences with something in common.

   However _____, _____.

   However various the appearances are, the basic pattern can be seen.

5. A structure for restating with a greater degree of specificity or generality.

   _____; _____.

   Some artists don't mind chaos; Paul Klee considers it "a natural place to start."

   Odili ran for office; he decided to accept the political process.

My colleague, Susan Horton, asked her students to compose and collect "workhorse" sentences. She gathered some of the strongest and circulated them, not indicating which were written by students. Here they are; add your own.

1. To satisfy customers, she developed an array of techniques as much psychological as physical, which allowed her to steal, by her accounts, from stores that might well have thought she was a good customer.
2. And older still, he might have divined the true reason: that the element of fire spoke to some deep mainspring of his father's being, as the element of steel or of powder spoke to other men, as the one weapon for the preservation of integrity, else breath were not worth the breathing, and hence to be regarded with respect and used with discretion.
3. I'm being paid to be serious, to tell potential book buyers what the product is about, to analyze the author's intentions, to interpret, if possible, his symbolism, or to criticize his conclusions.
4. She pooh-poohed Mother's taste, snorted at our ignorance of Myers family history, treated us as mere custodians of the Myers furniture, resented alterations, and had the memory of a mastodon for Cousin Cassie's associations with each piece.
5. There are degrees of violence, from the relatively normal shock effect of many forms of modern art, through pornography and obscenity—which achieve their desired reaction through violence to our forms of life—to the extreme pathology of assassinations and the murders of the moors.
6. In Dorothy Parker's short story "Promises, Promises," as the protagonist appeals to God for assistance, for courage, for attention, it becomes evident that the man her heart is buried in and the God she appeals to are interchangeable; both are intermittently faultless and contemptible; both are to blame for her hope and her lack of hope; both are projections of her own insecurities.
7. The experimenter prescribes what the child shall do, not how he shall do it, and the results are enlightening not only because of what they tell us about the potential range of the children's ability, but also by what they refuse to do and cannot do.
8. Rather than wasting time constructing long-winded sentences that circle unendingly, never reaching the point, never saying anything, a writer should take his reader by

the mind, lead him down no dark alleys, honor him with clarity: inform rather than perform.

If you try to use these or any other patterns without having on hand a chaos of names, they will simply remain slots to be filled, but if you have a chaos that can provide the materials and you have done some preliminary opposing, then you can use them as forms to find forms, linguistic structures to help you discover and formulate relationships and thus to make meanings in making statements.

Review the composing you've done in the previous section (*Listing and Classifying*). Practice using this repertory of sentence patterns to convert "X is Y" sentences.

Generalizing and Interpreting

As you make statements, you soon leave chaos far behind. The classifying implicit in naming becomes explicit; the oppositions generated from a chaos of names become sentences. The composing process of naming, opposing, defining involves you in *forming concepts.* A concept is a supername: logicians define a class as "the field of a concept's application." You can think of a concept as the name of a class. Forming concepts is a dialectical operation: concepts don't just "have" meanings; they are our means of making meaning. Forming concepts is not something you do before you write. ("How are you coming with your paper, Abner?" "Oh fine. I've thought it all out and tomorrow I'm going to put in the words.") A concept is like a hand that gathers; it is also the handful. Here's how it works:

- What's that?
- A boomerang.
- What's it for?
- Fun. It's for fun. You throw it and it comes back.
- Well, how does it work?
- It's like a foil. It's a wind foil.
- Like an airplane wing, sort of?
- Yeh, except it's all wing. The curve, the way it's made, determines the flight path so that it doesn't just keep going; it curves back.
- I'll bet you can't throw it around in your backyard.
- No way. This old football field is the only place. On the beach, it might hit somebody.
- You could hit me!

The inventors of the boomerang were the Australian aborigines. If HDWDWW? were directed toward an Australian bushman, the answer might be in narrative form, a telling rather than a definition. Or it might be wordless: a demonstration would serve. From a different perspective, HDWDWW? would generate different answers, but the appearance of the boomerang, its shape and construction, would obviously not be changed by one description or another.

But now consider what happens if *boomerang* is taken to refer not to the object but to what it does. Not just boomerangs boomerang. As a verb, *boomerang* refers not to shape but to the kind of action in which something is thrown out, only to come back at the thrower in a surprising and generally sinister way. Remarks and good deeds and a solution to a problem can be classified as things that boomerang. Boomeranging gives a name to the action of going-out-and-coming-back-towards-you-on-its-own; and it gathers up examples of that action. Boomeranging is a concept because it provides the limits that guide you in classifying and exemplifying. A concept provides the criteria by which you can judge how something resembles something else; it provides a form that can help you find further instances that represent it.

Here is a philosopher's explanation of how we form a concept:

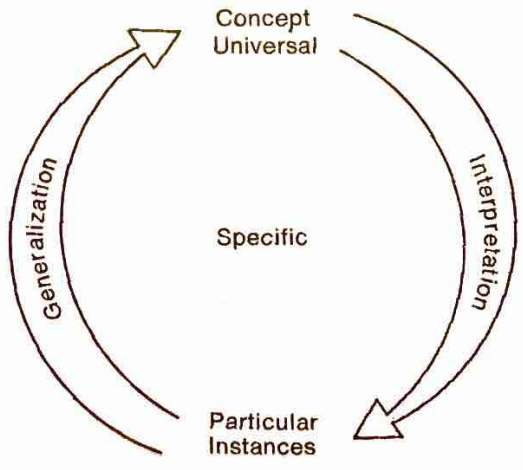
> Consider . . . how many motions follow the general pattern called "oscillation." The swing of a pendulum, the swaying of a skyscraper, the vibration of a violin string over which the bow is passing, the chatter of our teeth on a cold day—all these are examples of the type-form called "oscillation." Now, if we were to define this type-form, we would omit all reference to skyscrapers and fiddle-strings and teeth, and describe it, probably, as "rhythmic motion to and fro," or in some such terms that would connote only the *sort of motion* we are talking about and not the *sort of thing that moves.* Probably each of us has learned the meaning of oscillation through a different medium; but whether we gathered our first idea of it from the shaking of Grandpa's palsied hands —or from the quiver of a tuning fork—or from the vibration of a parked automobile with the motor running—however our *mental pictures* may differ from each other, they have one thing in common: they are all derived from some rhythmic motion to and fro. The things exemplifying this *type* of motion are not necessarily alike in other respects;

the swaying skyscraper and the vibrating violin-string are certainly not alike in appearance, origin or purpose. But their motions have the common property of going rhythmically to and fro. This property is the *logical form* of their motions, and so we may call all these motions diverse instances of the same form.

When we consider the common form of various things, or various events, and call it by a name that does not suggest any particular thing or event, or commit us to any mental picture—for instance, when we consider this common form of various movements, and call it by a name such as "oscillation"—we are consciously, deliberately abstracting the form from all things which have it. Such an abstracted form is called a *concept.* From our concrete experiences we form the *concept of oscillation.*

Susanne K. Langer, *Introduction to Symbolic Logic*

The organized comparing by which you discover "the common form of various things" is called *generalization:* When you use the abstracted form to identify further examples of the concept, this is called *interpretation.* You can go "up" from individual events, objects, activities to the idea that they could be said to represent—or you can go "down" from the abstracted form to the particular instances. Forming concepts involves moving in both directions. You can't form a concept until you know how it might apply, nor can you gather up examples and instances unless you know what they might be examples of. The composing process is dialectical: how can you know what you think until you hear what you say? How can you know what things belong together until you have an idea of what they have in common? How could you know what might be the common characteristics unless you had an idea of their commonality? Forming concepts is a circle all right, but not a vicious circle; it's a methodical circle:



Here's how generalizing and interpreting work together to form the concept of *city:* When you note that everywhere you go in a certain kind of place there are streets, you are generalizing, since any one street might look very different from the others. In generalizing, you note what is similar in a number of streets—forms that you recognize as being *different* from, say, open spaces. You note a general character as represented in particular streets. Then if you note that in other places there are also many streets, you can conclude that places-with-many-streets form a class that has the conventional name of *city.* As you discover that there are several such characteristics notable in every city you visit, that there are several general statements that hold true for the class of places named *city,* then by this organized comparing you are forming the concept of *city.*

Now then, suppose you have limited the field of application of the concept *city* by listing ten characteristics and that you begin to study the cities of China and India: what if only five of your general statements hold true for these new examples? By generalizing, you have formed a class, but in using this class-concept (the concept is the name of the class) to guide your investigation of other possible members of the class, you see that the membership "rules" don't apply. You have two choices: either you deny membership to the new samples or you change the rules to allow entry. You could decide that in order to be classified as a city, a place need have only five specified characteristics, thus changing the criteria for membership in that class; or you could keep the specifications and decide that the conglomerations you've been studying aren't eligible for membership in the class "city."

Forming concepts requires not just one such adjustment of class-name and specifications, but a continuing operation of naming and defining, renaming and redefining. One of the most interesting things about composition is that in learning to write you are learning to exercise choice by recognizing and using limits that are, of course, forms that find forms. But limits are not laid down in Heaven: they are subject to change according to the composer's needs. Limits are recognized, but they are also modified and adapted, discarded and reestablished. That process—which is essential to the forming of concepts—is carried on by means of stating and restating. Paraphrasing—restating—is the best way of converting "What do I mean?" to a critical question: "If I say it this way, how does that make it different from what it is when I say it that way?" By para-

phrasing, you draw out the implications of your statement: You "spell out" what you mean.

Along with paraphrases that restate, one of the chief means of forming a concept is to state the opposite case. We have noted that naming something *A* implies that it is not *Not-A*. When you state the opposite case, you name *Not-A* and in the process you more clearly differentiate *A*, thus establishing limits that will help you in interpreting, deciding just what is to be classified as *A*. Like all other kinds of opposition, "the opposite case" helps you discover what you want to say; it helps you form the concept you intend to explain or discuss. Saying what something is *not* is one way of determining what it *is*.

Here's how a master explainer uses the opposite case to characterize and define the language of epic poetry.

> The language . . . must be *familiar* in the sense of being expected. But in Epic, which is the highest species of oral court poetry, it must not be *familiar* in the sense of being colloquial or commonplace. The desire for simplicity is a late and sophisticated one. We moderns may like dances which are hardly distinguishable from walking and poetry which sounds as if it might be uttered *ex tempore*. Our ancestors did not. They liked a dance which *was* a dance, and fine clothes which no one could mistake for working clothes, and feasts that no one could mistake for ordinary dinners, and poetry that unblushingly proclaimed itself to be poetry. What is the point of having a poet, inspired by the Muse, if he tells stories just as you or I would have told them? It will be seen that these two demands, taken together, absolutely necessitate a Poetic Diction; that is, a language which is familiar because it is used in every part of every poem, but unfamiliar because it is not used outside poetry. A parallel, from a different sphere, would be turkey and plum pudding on Christmas day; no one is surprised at the menu, but every one recognizes that it is not *ordinary* fare. Another parallel would be the language of a liturgy. Regular church-goers are not surprised by the service—indeed, they know a great deal of it by rote, but it is a language apart. Epic diction, Christmas fare, and the liturgy, are all examples of ritual—that is, of something set deliberately apart from daily usage, but wholly familiar within its own sphere.
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> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"*

In a critical reading of C. S. Lewis's explanation of the character of epic diction, you can see that he *classifies:* he tells us that epic diction has a kind of familiarity that he explains by *stating the opposite case.* He then *interprets* this concept by *exemplifying,* by presenting *particular* examples of activities that are like the language of epic poetry and thus can be grouped as members of the same class. He thus *establishes the field of the concept's application.* Lewis ends the paragraph by renaming this class of the familiar-which-is-expectable-but-not-common-place; he has *formed the concept* of ritual which dialectically has enabled him to explain epic diction.

Forming concepts is the way you see/explain relationships; as you form concepts, you are making meanings, and that is the purpose of language and the purpose of composition. Everything Lewis does in forming the concept of ritual in order to explain epic diction—I have italicized above the acts of mind involved —could be described in much more complex logical language, but no such analysis could help you learn from reading him how to compose your own definitions. For that to happen, I believe you have to think about his thinking and thus learn ways of thinking about your own thinking.

Here is how Astrid Oosterman used the opposite case to guide her description of a building. Read her paragraph (and reread Lewis's) and then compose your own paragraph(s) describing a person or place, using the opposite case.

The Boston Public Library is a classically designed, symmetrically balanced edifice intended to be a lasting monument to wisdom and learning. It has a magnificent setting and facade facing Copley Square. One walks between the two symbolic Greek statues to the center entrance flanked by a series of identical round-headed windows. From the small main lobby, a grand divided staircase leads to the second floor and the main reading room, a spacious hall with a high vaulted ceiling supported by heavy pilasters. The decorations, both inside and out, are many and ornate: the well-known wrought-iron gates and lamps at the entrance and the murals, decorated ceilings, and imported marble and tile used on the floors and staircase.

On the other hand, one is less impressed with the University of Massachusetts library as an individual edifice be-

cause it was designed to be a functional part of the whole university. This functional use of space is what sets modern architecture apart from the classical style. The building has no obvious facade or entrance. In fact it can only be entered from the underground garage or the glass catwalk that connects the university buildings. The use of steel beams presents the opportunity for cantilevered construction. This means that portions of the building can project or jut out over the perpendicular supports, using space that otherwise would not be available. The lines are simple, severe and clean; in effect, the building speaks for itself; any exterior decoration would detract from, not add to, its functional appearance. Inside, the poured concrete walls and severe geometrical shapes are softened by the use of carpeting, bright paint, and soft, inviting couches. This modern style is conclusively demanded by its use as a multi-media center.

Here are some assisted invitations to see how forming concepts is a process that guides composing. First, a brief recapitulation of the procedure as we've discussed it so far.

1. Generate chaos by naming in response to a word/thing/example/concept.
2. Substantiate the terms of HDWDWW? (Name the *who*'s and *what*'s, the *how*'s and *why*'s.)
3. Develop oppositions to represent the relationships between agent, action, manner, purpose; between particular examples and generalization; between generalization and generalization. (Draw a line down the middle of the page to get started.)
4. Make statements by developing oppositions in sentence form.
5. State the opposite case.

Form a concept by means of which you can explain *academic grading*. Some of the steps listed above will be more helpful than others. You can discover the concept by comparing academic grading to other kinds of grading and then to other kinds of academic activity. Developing the opposite case can help you form the class, the field of application of the concept. Use Lewis's paragraph as a model for organizing your statements.

Form the concept of *maturity* by describing examples of mature behavior, mature decisions, mature attitudes—or any examples of acts and manners you can think of. You can discover such examples by answering HDWDWW? Compose statements in which you interpret and generalize until you have established the concept's field of application.

Form the concept of *the country*. When you come to the opposite case, develop three: *city, suburbs, wilderness*. Which one best helps you to establish the field of application of the concept of the country? Organize your statements in order to explain the character of the country.

Form the concept of *welfare* in such a way as to gather up the following two statements:

1. "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."
2. The reason our taxes are so high is that we are paying for people on welfare who don't want to work.

Here is an assisted invitation first to see how the concept of the West of Ireland emerges from three passages, and then to compose a paragraph in which you form the concept of a particular place.

1. V. S. Pritchett, in this first passage, manages just about everything a writer ever does: he describes and generalizes, interprets and defines, setting forth a point of view that he then supports with facts and explains with his own interpretations. He names and develops oppositions, expressing personal opinions and general truths. By the end, he has established limits so that he can continue his

interpretations and generalizations. In short, he has formed a concept.

> In these western solitudes, where the sky puts on an even wilder show than it does over the Irish Sea, where the long twilight is like an evening in the theatre, the people have several kinds of foreignness, for Ireland is more Irish, less Cromwellian,* less genteel. People still talk of Cork men, Galway men, Limerick men, with a certain note of tribal mockery and touchiness in their voices. "Cork men hang together," says a Galway man in the voice of one preparing a cattle raid.† Another foreignness is an almost morbid quickness of mind: they listen to half your sentence, guess the rest and cap it, getting their blow in first. I call it morbid because of its mixed source in the desire to ingratiate and to flatter with an apparent sympathy and yet to be sure to win and give nothing of themselves. Unlike the English, the Irish do not wear their heart upon their sleeves. They prefer comedy: it hides the self from vulgar definition. And there is the final foreignness of having known what it is to be foreign in another country. Most of them have. Tragically, inevitably, Ireland has always been the country of goodbyes. That is what nearly all the ballads are about, the ballads you hear at Howth, at Bray, in Galway, in some of the Dublin pubs. Perhaps the real foreignness of Ireland in the modern world is nothing to do with race, history or climate, but is created by its empti-

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* In the seventeenth century, some of those who had supported the rebellion against the English monarchy were rewarded by Oliver Cromwell, the ruler of republican Britain, with estates in the east of Ireland. Their descendants are Protestant and, in many cases, are more "English" than "Irish" in their temperament and sympathy.

† Cattle raids are important subjects in Irish epic and folklore. Pritchett's observation suggests that whatever is represented in the character of those heroic thieves is still alive in the modern Irishman, at least in the West of Ireland.

> ness, the only emptiness in Europe, a spaciousness tragically made by all those goodbyes, but which we, in the crowded corner of Europe, look at with envy and with covetousness. There is a discreet immigration from abroad but whether the outsiders can ever join the secret society is another matter.

2. John Millington Synge, whose play "The Playboy of the Western World" was driven off the stage in Dublin and elsewhere at the turn of the century because it dealt with Irish life in a way considered scandalous, wrote personal narratives of his travels in the West of Ireland among the peasants, whose imagination he admired and with whose struggles he sympathized. In this passage (from "In West Kerry," 1907) he describes a scene and his experience at the time in the manner of a letter.

> . . . I went on towards Dunquin, and lay for a long time on the side of a magnificently wild road under Croagh Martin, where I could see the Blasket Islands and the end of Dunmore Head, the most westerly point of Europe. It was a grey day with a curious silence on the sea and sky and no sign of life anywhere, except the sail of one curagh—or niavogue, as they are called here—and that was sailing in from the islands. Now and then a cart passed me filled with old people and children, who saluted me in Irish; then I turned back myself. I got on a long road running through a bog, with a smooth mountain on one side and the sea on the other, and Brandon in front of me, partly covered with clouds. As far as I could see there were little groups of people on their way to the chapel in Ballyferriter, the men in homespun and the women wearing blue cloaks, or, more often, black shawls twisted over their heads. This procession along the olive bogs, between the mountains and the sea, on this grey day of autumn seemed to wring me with the pang of emotion

one meets everywhere in Ireland—an emotion that is partly local and patriotic, and partly a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world.

3. Thomas H. Mason has no claim to fame; he was an optician from Dublin, an antiquarian and a photographer of birds, who loved islands and wrote about his travels in an unpretentious little book called *The Islands of Ireland* (1936). Here he tells a story he heard on Clare Island, off the coast of County Clare in the West of Ireland.

> There are no police on the island, but before the Free State regime they occupied Granuaile's Castle, often having to keep their prisoners for a considerable time until it was possible to make the crossing to the mainland, for there was no magistrate on the island. The social center is the kitchen of the hotel where, in the evening, one will always find some men sitting on forms [benches] placed against the walls. I heard many stories of the agitation before the island was "taken over" by the Land Commission. During the "Land War" the entire population gathered together one evening with all the horses and donkeys on the island; they spent the night singing and dancing and turned the animals loose among the crops raised by the bailiff on a "seized" farm. Needless to say, the crops were ruined; the police were powerless, but when the excitement had somewhat died down a few of the supposed ringleaders were arrested and brought for trial to the mainland.
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> The country Irishman is a very astute witness in the courts and often scores at the expense of the lawyers. On this occasion the principal prisoner was asked on his oath had he not got his horse with him on the night in question. His reply, "On my oath, I never had a horse," was greeted with cheers and laughter by the islanders who thronged the court. They saw the point which the Crown Prose-

> cutor failed to perceive: the prisoner had no horse, but he certainly had a mare. He was acquitted.
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> He boasts that he has done more for his country than any of the politicians, because he was arrested later for throwing stones at the bailiff's son and spent a month in jail. He is now an old man clad in homespuns, with a white beard and of venerable appearance. Although almost eighty years of age he is out before daybreak working on his farm, and his one great regret is that he paid his land annuities [taxes] when others on the island had already ceased to do so.

Form the concept of the West of Ireland as it emerges from these three passages. (You will be explaining what *kind* of place it seems to be.)

Consider a part of the country you know well and, following the procedural guide, develop a concept of this region, large or small. Then compose a paragraph or two in one or another of the following modes: (a) a personal letter or a passage from such a letter; (b) a guidebook description; (c) an editorial. (Editorials are differentiated from features and news stories by explicitly setting forth opinion on public matters, urging one course of action or another, or thinking out loud about ideas, what's happening, etc. In an editorial you could, for instance, consider a region from an ecological point of view.)

Defining

You form a concept by generalizing from particular examples and by interpreting those examples and others in the light of the class-concept you have formed. This process of forming should be kept dialectical because if you decide too quickly or too absolutely what belongs in the class, you lose the chance to discover ways in which the class itself could be changed in order to accumulate further interesting and important examples. It isn't a tick-tock, tick-tock operation: Each time you examine