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# Explorations: A Guided Inquiry into Writing-- Chapter 1

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Get curious and that's marvelous  
And that's your reward  
You'll never be bored  
If you ask yourself, what is this?  
--from Curious George PBS theme song

## Chapter 1: The Nature and Process of Inquiry

You might be familiar with a little monkey named Curious George. One of the reasons he is such a beloved story, cartoon, and movie character—for over 60 years, by the way—is because both children and adults recognize something in him that we experience every day. Curious George is, well, curious. The stories about him focus on the moments when he realizes, for whatever reason, that he needs to know something and then on his process of attempting to satisfy that curiosity. Take one cartoon episode where his friend and caretaker, the Man with the Big Yellow Hat, brings home a new rug. As soon as The Man leaves the house, George helps himself to a snack and then needs to figure out how to remove a rather large grape juice stain from the rug. Then he needs to determine how to remove all that water from the living room. Then he needs to negotiate how to get the neighbor's pump out of the barn. That's followed by creating a strategy to get the cows out of their pens so they can pull the pump to his house....In other words, his curiosity leads him from one question to another and another until his problem or need to know is resolved. George is always involved in some form of inquiry.

### WHAT IS INQUIRY?

In short, according to respected scholar of invention and inquiry, Janice Lauer, inquiry is a **process** that includes all of the following:

- “Questions, curiosities, or puzzlements”;
- Investigation and exploration <research>;
- Insight--some “new understanding, perspective, or knowledge”; and
- Communication and testing of the insight (154).

To conduct an inquiry is to ask questions for which you have no answers, explore and investigate your questions, arrive at some sort of an answer, and share your answer with others to test its effectiveness. Looking at the eventual goal of inquiry—to answer the question(s) asked—inquiry might then mean that a problem is solved, that some curiosity is satisfied, that an uncertainty is eliminated, or even that no definitive answer is attainable at the time.

Inquiry is fundamental to our daily lives, even if we don’t always engage the whole process. What will I eat for dinner? How early do I need to get up in the morning so that I can make copies of my paper before class? What movie should I see Friday night? It’s true that these are simplistic examples of inquiry, since we don’t always need to do much investigation to arrive at new insight. What I eat for dinner may only require investigating what I have in my kitchen pantry and refrigerator. How early I must rise to make copies before class involves calculating how long I think it will take to make the copies and setting my alarm on the clock that much earlier. The choice about which movie to see may be determined by asking my friends what they recommend.

However, when the stakes are high, as they can be in your academic career, profession, and personal life, your inquiry(ies) will call for a much more conscious, strategic approach. You might usefully think of this type of inquiry as a combination of

Curious George and Sherlock Holmes or as a conscious process of curiosity that guides planned, strategic exploration and investigation.

Every inquiry is unique. Depending on the complexity of the inquiry, the process can be relatively straight-forward as in the manner of the chart below, or it can be very messy. When it's messy, you may find yourself all over the chart simultaneously. Don't worry. This is as it should be.

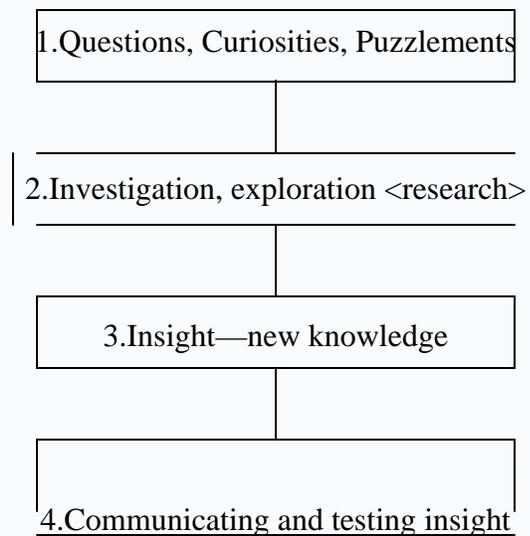


Figure 1: Process of Inquiry

So, while there is not one way to satisfy all of your inquiries, every process of inquiry does include: (1) a moment of realization that some knowledge or understanding is missing, followed by an assessment of how important it is to you to have that knowledge; a conscious effort to construct questions that capture your sense of a need to know; (2) the creation of a plan of research to guide your exploration and investigation; (3) the making of knowledge that is your insight; and (4) a sharing of that knowledge with others as a way to test your insight.

## The process of inquiry and rhetoric

Your experience with the term *rhetoric* is likely to be negative. In popular culture, rhetoric is often used as a pejorative term indicating words without any meaning behind them or as something that is separate from a particular reality. You've probably heard it most often associated with politicians and their discourse on just about any topic. In fact a search for the word *rhetoric* through a news service database such as msnbc.com will produce a flurry of negative uses such as “controversial” rhetoric, “inflammatory” rhetoric, “racist” rhetoric, “fiery” rhetoric, “empty” political rhetoric, “sky-is-falling” rhetoric, and “relentless” rhetoric—to mention just a few. In each of these instances, the descriptors associated with rhetoric are used to negatively describe the overall nature of a speaker or group's language. On not one occasion did we find rhetoric used in a positive sense

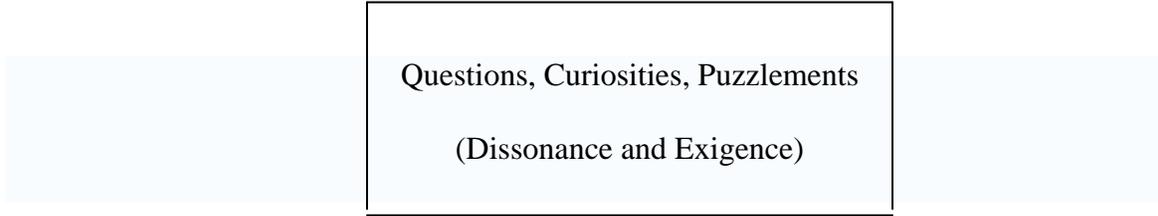
Yet rhetoric has a rich and complex history dating back to even before Greek Antiquity. Philosophers of whom you already know, such as Plato and Aristotle, had much to positively say about rhetoric. What you may not know is that a contemporary discipline, sometimes called Rhetoric and Writing or Rhetoric and Composition, has created a body of knowledge about both rhetoric and writing, along with the connection between them.

For many teachers and scholars of Rhetoric and Writing, **rhetoric** is defined simply as **strategic discourse**. Strategic discourse is language used by a person(s) in a particular situation for a specific purpose relative to a particular audience. A person's enactment of strategic discourse, however, is conditioned by “situatedness,” a concept

meaning that the degree to which you are allowed to speak/write at all, along with the discourse you're able to use and make, is dependent on your existence in a particular historical moment and in a particular place.

Significantly, strategic discourse includes all discourse: the good, the bad, and the ugly. And all inquiry is inherently rhetorical because all inquiry involves the strategic use of discourse. As those who actively study the nature and processes of strategic discourse, students/teachers/scholars are called rhetoricians; you are thus now a budding rhetorician. As rhetoricians, we believe as did many classical rhetoricians did and many contemporary rhetoricians do, that an understanding of rhetoric is essential to the *invention* of knowledge. In other words, rhetoric is the means to both make and to share knowledge. And, we define knowledge broadly as any insight shared with an audience who finds value in that insight.

### **What is the motivation of a question, curiosity, or puzzlement?**



Questions, Curiosities, Puzzlements  
(Dissonance and Exigence)

Inquiry can be motivated in a number of different ways. Sometimes it originates with you, yourself, as you recognize a problem or issue that you believe needs to be addressed or you experience a conflict between your reality and what you would like that reality to be. Maybe you're having a tough time deciding what your major will be and

your friends and family are pressuring you to make a decision now. This problem requires inquiry, if you're to make a choice based on what's best for your interests, aptitudes, and future goals rather than the "shot in the dark" approach you could take to just get everyone off your back. If, for example, you're interested in rhetoric and writing studies, sociology, and business, you'll need to explore and investigate these disciplines to determine which best meets your needs. You'll likely then share, discuss, and argue your insight/decision with friends and family. In doing so, you'll be testing the quality of your decision based on how well your family and friends are convinced that your decision meets your stated criteria of interests, aptitudes, and future goals.

Or maybe you work in a restaurant where you see a lot of food go to waste every week. You're also concerned about homelessness in our society, particularly as it affects children, since you've learned that nutrition for young children can affect their cognitive abilities for the rest of their lives. Here, you have a problem (wasted food) and a state of reality (homelessness) that you would like to change. You investigate the situation, devise a plan that could work and then present it to the restaurant manager and the homeless shelter director. While you know that your situated efforts alone won't eradicate homelessness, you do however have the satisfaction of knowing that your inquiry has contributed to a change in reality for many local homeless, hungry children and their families. These are instances when your inquiry is motivated directly by yourself and the situation you're in.

But, inquiry is also motivated by others, such as in the workplace when you're given a problem to resolve or in the university when you're given a specific assignment to complete. Maybe your workplace management is considering several alternatives to an

existing problem and they ask you to research these alternatives and make a recommendation to them of which to take. Although this inquiry wasn't self-motivated, it will be important that you locate self-motivation for the project, if you are to do a good job that can further your own career goals. Likewise, in your academic career you'll often be required to write about a specific subject, topic, or issue for which the guidelines may be very open, too open for your preference, so you'll need to locate your own self-motivation for the project if you are to achieve the goals of learning and earning the grade you'd like to receive. The point is that regardless of the motivation for the inquiry, whether internally or externally generated, it is crucial for you to identify the triggers of motivation that ultimately lead to inquiry. These triggers, *dissonance* and *exigence*, are also the source of your questions, curiosities, and puzzlements.

### **Identifying Dissonance/Exigence**

Say you've twisted your ankle while hiking. One of the first things you'll ask yourself is how to care for it and alleviate the pain. You might not know if you should apply heat or ice to the injury. Here you have a situation for inquiry, for you have a question that requires exploration and investigation. If it's during your doctor's office hours, you might call and talk it over with the nurse who will ask you a series of questions and then prescribe a course of action. If it's after hours, you might turn to the internet. A quick google search for "sprains and strains" might lead you to an article on [www.medlineplus.com](http://www.medlineplus.com), where you'll learn that "Holding an ice pack on a sprained ankle for no more than 10 minutes at a time is more effective for easing pain than icing for a longer stretch of time."

Ok, apply ice for no more than 10 minutes at a time, but you might be curious to know *how* the researchers concluded this treatment to be effective. The Medlineplus article tells you that “To investigate, the researchers tested two different icing protocols in 89 people with mild to moderate ankle sprains, about half of whom were athletes,” and if you read to the bottom of the screen, you see that the results were published in *The British Journal of Sports Medicine*. Satisfied with the information, you hobble to the freezer.

With this one painful example, we can see the motivation for inquiry at work. Because you don’t have a response for your question, you experience **dissonance**, which broadly defined is “a tension or puzzlement” (Lauer 151). We experience dissonance, for example, when we need knowledge that we don’t have and/or when our experience clashes with our values (151). At any rate, you experience dissonance when you twist your ankle because you need knowledge that you don’t have. You need knowledge of how to treat the ankle.

However, it was the situation of spraining your ankle that created your **exigence**, which we define as a situation that requires some sort of response or action. A twisted ankle is such a situation. But because you didn’t know what treatment to use on your ankle, this dissonance (knowledge that you needed but didn’t have) led you to ask the question, “What should I do?” You actively explored and investigated a solution to alleviate the pain and heal the sprain as quickly as possible, and thus you are now hobbling off to get a bag of ice to place on the sprain.

But what if, as you are filling up a bag of ice, your roommate says: “Stop! What are you doing? Everyone knows that heat is what a sprained ankle requires to heal itself.”

“Heat?” You ask. “I didn’t read anything about heat.” This conflicting bit of knowledge again leads you to experience dissonance, a tension between what you thought you knew about treating a sprained ankle and the new piece of information or knowledge provided by your roommate. This dissonance is a result of a clash in your conceptual systems and would likely spur you toward yet another inquiry, for you would want to confirm whether it is appropriate to apply heat or ice to your injured ankle. Perhaps at this point, therefore, you go back to your computer, call up *The British Journal of Sports Medicine* through your library database, and find an article that explains in great detail the background, objective, subjects, methods, results, and conclusions of the study.

By examining this research article from *The British Journal of Sports Medicine*, we can see dissonance/exigence for inquiry at a more abstract level. While it’s doubtful, albeit possible, that the research scientists who wrote the article ever experienced a painful ankle injury themselves, they nevertheless experienced dissonance/exigence for conducting an inquiry of the topic. Their dissonance/exigence, in fact, might be located in the first paragraph of the article:

Ankle injuries are one of the most common acute soft tissue injuries, incurring a significant cost to both the individual and society. Despite the high incidence, cost, and long term morbidity, however, the optimal method of managing acute ankle sprains remains controversial.

Cryotherapy for Acute Ankle Sprains: A Randomised Controlled Study of Two Different Icing Protocols. CM Bleakley, SM McDonough, DC MacAuley *The British Journal of Sports Medicine*. 40 (2006): 700-05.

Their exigence for writing the article, we might infer, is the commonality of ankle injuries along with the problems incurred by them. Their dissonance, or tension, is that there has been little agreement on how this type of injury is best treated. Definitively identifying which came first, exigence or dissonance, can be debatable but, in the end, it's not of much importance. Perhaps, they experienced dissonance first because the controversy about treatments indicated that no communal knowledge about treatment of this injury existed in the scientific community and it was their goal in the article to discuss the controversies and recommend the "perfect" treatment. The point is that just as all good scientists and researchers, they identified their exigence and dissonance and then created an extensive scientific study or inquiry which, in this situation, concluded that icing for 10 minutes at a time is the appropriate remedy for a sprained ankle.

This is not to say that some scientist somewhere will not disagree with their results and embark on her own process of inquiry by examining these scientists' methods and data for possible flaws, creating a new study, and reaching different conclusions, but at least for you, at this moment, the information on [medlineplus.com](http://medlineplus.com) is satisfactory. Your need for knowledge has been satisfied. And, through your process of inquiry, you have created knowledge for yourself.

Dissonance and exigence, then, are factors that trigger motivation for inquiry. **Dissonance**, "a tension or puzzlement" (Lauer 151) and **exigence**, a situation that requires some sort of response or action, constitute two sides of the motivation coin. This is why we write them with the slash, as in dissonance/exigence. If you flip a coin in the air, it will fall with one particular side up and one down. Similarly in life, your motivation may be triggered first by one or the other: dissonance/exigence. However, it is

just as likely that the dissonance/exigence of your motivation is motivated simultaneously, just as a coin exists as one piece with two sides.

Therefore, don't worry about which comes first. Remember, instead, that dissonance involves the identification of an individual, psychological tension or puzzlement. Exigence, on the other hand, involves the identification of a public situation of which you are already part and to which you need to respond and act or the identification of a situation that you yourself act to help create. Dissonance tends to be more individual while exigence tends to be more public.

### **Translating dissonance/exigence into questions, curiosities, and/or puzzlements**

Thinking back to the example we used earlier regarding your difficulty in deciding upon a major, it should now be obvious that this involves dissonance. You have a decision to make, but you find yourself curious about several different disciplines and genuinely puzzled as to how you can possibly make a decision at the start of your academic career. However, you also definitely experience an exigence for doing so in the form of your family and friends who expect you to not only make a decision but to also supply some sound reasoning for it.

How should you proceed? One way is to write down your dissonance/exigence. In this situation, you might write something as simple as this:

*I have an important life decision to make regarding what I will major in at the university, and I don't know how I can make this decision now. I'm interested in a lot of things, so I'd rather not close myself in, yet. But, my parents and friends*

*keep asking me about it and telling me that it's important to focus at the very start, so that I don't end up wasting a lot of money taking courses that won't count toward my major. I know they're right, but I really just don't know.*

If you're familiar with inquiry, you'll recognize that the dissonance/exigence you've just identified is indeed motivation for inquiry. Now, read over what you've written about your dissonance/exigence several times. You might do this over a couple of days. As you do so, think about questions that might guide you through a productive investigation of your problem. Write these down as they come to mind. You might end up with something similar to the following:

- I like rhetoric and writing a lot, but I don't know if I'm a good enough writer for that and, besides, what kind of jobs could I get with it?
- The course descriptions for sociology sound really interesting. But, what does a sociologist do? How would I know if I'd be any good at it?
- My parents are encouraging me toward a business major because they say I can always get a job with it. But when I look at the business college catalog, I get even more confused because you have to choose a specialty like management, marketing, or accounting. Would I be a good manager? Would I like marketing products and services? Do I like numbers well enough to major in accounting?

From here, begin writing down some tentative questions that could productively guide your inquiry:

- What major should I choose?
- What do you study in each of these disciplines?
- What discipline do I have the most interest and aptitude for?

- What kinds of jobs are possible with each discipline?
- What career would best fit with the goals I have now for my life?

With these questions, you have effectively generated a map by which to begin your journey of inquiry.

Perhaps, you've noticed in the above questions that to answer the first question, you need to answer all of the subsequent questions first. The first question is called a **direct** question and the subsequent questions are called **indirect**. A way to understand this distinction is to think of the direct question as *the* question that you absolutely want to answer, while the indirect questions may or may not help you toward this goal. In other words, you might well come back later in your inquiry to add more indirect questions and/or delete others. The main point to keep in mind is that the indirect questions are appropriate for your inquiry only if they contribute to answering the direct question, which in this situation is "What major should I choose?" If the indirect questions can't do this, you need to delete them, no matter how interesting they are because they will ultimately get you off-track in answering your all-important direct question.

**What is the connection between inquiry and investigation and exploration <research>?**

Exploration and Investigation

<Research>

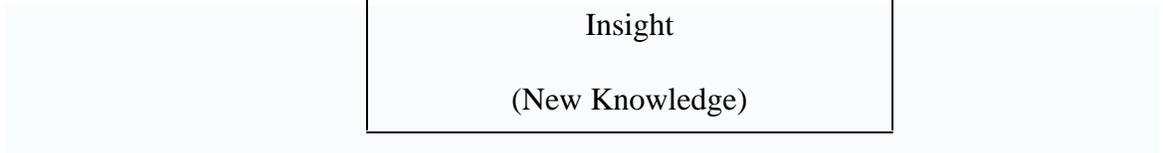
A significant portion of many inquiries is spent on exploration and investigation. Where **exploration** implies a search or examination conducted informally, **investigation** implies a more official and systematic examination based on the close scrutiny and analysis dictated by your chosen research methods. Together, exploration and investigation thus accurately describe **research**. For example, if you were a homicide detective working on a case, you might initially *explore* the possibility that any one of a number of people might have committed the crime. You would examine each person to narrow the list of suspects to maybe one or two. You would then conduct a thorough and systematic *investigation* of the remaining suspects, using research methods appropriate to your questions of inquiry. We will discuss research methods in the next chapter but suffice to say that if you do not use research methods appropriate to the sorts of questions you're asking in your inquiry, you are unlikely to come to new insight or knowledge, because you will likely be confused with your research results.

Some confusion, however, may be inevitable. Research can be and often is messy, precisely because the process is dynamic and recursive. Sometimes your investigation will lead you back to generating more or different questions of inquiry, and sometimes you will need to identify different research methods to elicit the sort of data or information you're seeking. And the results might be more complicated than you had imagined or might even be inconclusive. Indeed, sometimes you may be left with more questions than answers.

The point of research though is that you learn to cope with the messiness of it and, more importantly, that you learn to trust that your intellect, persistence, and hard work will pay off in the form of insight—knowledge making—that will be meaningful to both

you and to others. In any event, a thorough exploration and investigative research requires the exploration of a Curious George combined with the research skills of a Sherlock Holmes.

### **What is the connection between inquiry and insight?**



Insight  
(New Knowledge)

When your inquiry is triggered by dissonance/exigence, you have articulated your definite and indefinite questions, you have thoroughly explored and investigated your questions using appropriate research methods, you will inevitably come to some new insight. Now, we're not talking about something that moves the ground, such as Einstein's theory of relativity. Rather, we're talking about an insight in which you create knowledge that is new for you and which would also be of interest to others. The beauty of inquiry, then, is that you aren't engaging in a process of merely regurgitating what anyone has ever said about a particular problem; rather, you are yourself a knowledge maker.

### **What is the connection between inquiry and communicating your insight?**



Communicating Your Insight

Anytime you communicate the results of your inquiry, you do so within the parameters of some rhetorical context. Examples of contexts can include a particular classroom, newspaper editorial, campus club, workplace, blog, social networking website, fan club, a group of your friends, etc. Communicating your insight includes testing it to determine if others (your audience) will validate your insight as knowledge. Such validation is patently rhetorical, as it depends on factors of your position relative to the **audience**, the nature of the audience themselves, the quality of the inquiry you've conducted, and the effectiveness of your discourse with the audience.

A more productive way to think about audience, particularly in view of the audience's role in validating your insight as knowledge, is to reconceptualize audience as a **discourse community**. Understanding a discourse community, then, can help you to take a more thoughtful approach to the traditional notion of audience, along with how you will need to approach the discourse community to gain the validation you seek for your insight.

### **Discourse community**

A **discourse community** can be thought of as a group of people who have some particular trait in common. This trait could be a situation, an interest, a value, a goal, or some combination of these. For example, a group of people attending a Bruce Springsteen concert, who do so because they find value in Springsteen and his music, share something that constitutes the basis of a discourse community, even though the group members would likely disagree about the nature and degree of that value. That is, some might argue that the early Springsteen music is better than the later. Some might want to compare Springsteen to another performer and rate the two according to some specific criteria. Others might object to the comparison, itself, or to the criteria used.

People might disagree about what Springsteen’s historical legacy is and will be in the future. The point is that a discourse community comes together around some shared topic, but there can be multiple and differing perspectives about the shared topic.

Furthermore, it is discourse that drives the community. Springsteen and his music, for example, provide the exigence for the emergence of the discourse community, but it is the discourse people choose to engage with other like-minded people that articulates the meaning or value they attach to Springsteen and his music. It’s this discourse that gives birth to rhetorical contexts—fan clubs, fanzines, blogs, dedicated chatrooms, etc. It’s also this discourse that creates the impetus for concerts, music videos, recording contracts, t-shirts, concert programs, feature magazine articles, Barbara Walters’ interviews, etc. Even entire industries and institutions are driven by discourse. **Discourse**, then, effectively acts to create and maintain a particular discourse community; equally important, discourse acts to influence behaviors and material objects within the discourse community.

Members of a discourse community can participate in the shared discourse in a variety of ways. They also do not need to be personally acquainted with every other member to participate. For example, members of any discourse community, including the Springsteen discourse community, can “discourse” face-to-face or virtually. Face-to-face encounters could occur at a concert, at a party, at a club, etc., while virtual encounters could occur in online chatrooms, discussion boards, blogs, and/or regular email.

With what different discourse communities do you participate? How do they compare to the Springsteen example of a discourse community?

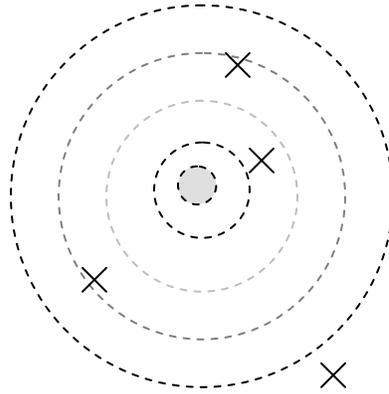
How could a classroom be considered a discourse community?

Can you speculate how your college or university as an institution is constituted through people's shared discourse?

### **Membership in a discourse community**

All of us belong to multiple discourse communities. These discourse communities fluctuate, as we float in and out of some and ultimately take up residence in new ones. Sometimes, we belong to a discourse community by default. Our families would be an example of this sort. But there are others to which we belong through conscious choice, and there are yet others to which we might desire membership but to which membership is highly restricted and regulated or even denied.

It's helpful to use a visual to illustrate how people can be situated, relative to a discourse community (see Graph 1 below). We use a series of concentric, but fluid, circles to illustrate this phenomenon. As you study the visual, think of the very center as the space where the most powerful people in the discourse community reside. They effectively reside over the community's storehouse of knowledge and they act as not only gatekeepers to community access but also as the primary validators of new knowledge submitted for acceptance by the discourse community. They are, in other words, the consummate insiders, the people "in the know." Dispersing from the center, the radiating concentric circles represent "situatedness," or where individuals within the community reside, relative to the center and to each other. The spaces located on the boundaries of each circle conceptually represent opportunities for movement or change. We might say, then, that spaces or windows of opportunity exist for the movement of individuals within the community, as well as for change to the community's storehouse of knowledge.



Graph 1 – Situatedness in Discourse Communities

We want to emphasize that depending on the situation and the particular discourse community, our “situatedness” within the discourse community is contingent upon a variety of factors. It’s true that we can often make choices about where we want to be “situated” within a discourse community, but it’s also a reality that sometimes our choice or our desire for a specific situatedness is pressured by circumstances largely beyond our control. In the latter situation, we might be “stuck” in some location, we might be denied access altogether, or we might even find ourselves involuntarily ejected. When we do have some measure of choice, however, we may discover that we want to be at the center of a particular discourse community, while in another discourse community, we may actually want to remain at the periphery.

Your decision to persuade a particular discourse community to validate the insight of your inquiry as knowledge will therefore likely be influenced by your “situatedness” in that discourse community. You will thus need to consider how you want your

“situatedness” to change as a result of communicating your insight with the community, as well as what the community’s validation could mean for both you and the community.

Why might a person *want* to remain situated at the periphery of a discourse community?

What might prevent a person from being situated at the center of a discourse community?

Are there discourse communities in which you would absolutely not want membership?

With what discourse communities are you situated in your academic career? Do you consider any of these to be “default” memberships? Where would you “situate” yourself now in these discourse communities? Where do you *want* to become situated in them?

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Inquiry is enacted in many ways. A primary way is through writing. As Lauer argues, “writing to inquire is writing to investigate, gain insight and communicate that insight” (154). Based on the idea that writing creates knowledge, the process of writing as inquiry begins with “questions, curiosities, or puzzlements,” with the goal that writers will be “more invested in their work, more likely to go beyond what they already know, more likely to explore, and therefore more likely to learn something new” (154). The dominant method of both inquiry and communication with an audience in this book will be accomplished through writing, widely conceived. Our assumption is that you will learn to communicate the new knowledge of your inquiry both orally and in writing, using a variety of media such as written documents, powerpoint presentations, websites, wikis, and the like. Don’t worry. You won’t be asked to produce something without sufficient guidance.

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed the process of inquiry and its rhetorical nature. Each of the parts of the process identified below, however, also entails sub-processes.

- “Questions, curiosities, or puzzlements”;
- Exploration and Investigation <research>;
- Insight--some “new understanding, perspective, or knowledge”; and
- Communication and testing of the insight (154).

We will discuss these sub-processes throughout the remainder of the book, using strategies that will help you to achieve the status of knowledge-maker in a variety of different discourse communities.