# Counterproductive Habits of Mind

## Generalizing

What it all boils down to is … What this adds up to is… The gist of her speech was… Generalizing is not always a bad habit; we generalize from our experiences because it is one way of arriving at ideas. Reducing complex events or theories or books or speeches to a reasonably accurate summarizing statement requires practice and skill. The problem with generalizing as a habit of mind is that it deflects attention – usually very quickly – from the data that produced the generalization in the first place.

Vagueness and generality are major blocks to learning because they allow you to dismiss virtually everything you’ve read and heard except the general idea you’ve arrived at. Often generalizations that come to mind are so broad that they tell us nothing. To say, for example, that a poem is about love or death or rebirth, or that the economy of a particular emerging nation is inefficient, accomplishes very little, since the generalizations could fit almost any poem or economy. In other words, your generalizations could fit almost any poem or economy. Your generalizations are often sites where you stopped thinking prematurely, not the “answers” you thought they were.

### How do you avoid this?

* Train yourself to be more self-conscious about where your generalizations came from.
* Choose to notice more and to keep noticing.
* Think of the words you use in terms of where they would fit on a scale from concrete to abstract. For example, “fish” is more descriptive than “protein” when describing food, whereas “salmon” is more descriptive than “fish.” You could even go further with “farm-raised,” “Sockeye,” or “Alaskan.”

### Note:

When you give more concrete information, you give your opponent more to work with to try to disprove or discredit your stance; on the other hand, if you have sound reasoning for your position, the more detail that is included will only make the argument stronger. If you were to describe a film simply as “horrible,” then you have given very little for anyone to discuss; however, if you were to say that a particular actor’s role was unbelievable, then you have something to debate. Don’t be afraid to question the reasoning behind generalizations; there may be actually nothing concrete holding it up.

## The Judgment Reflex

Much of what passes for thinking – in the press, on television, in everyday conversation – is actually not thinking but reflex behavior, reaction rather than thinking; right/wrong, good/bad, loved it/ hated it, couldn’t relate to it, boring.

In its most primitive form – most automatic and least thoughtful – judging is like an on/off switch. When the switch gets thrown in one direction or the other good/bad, right/wrong, positive/negative – the resulting judgment predetermines and overdirects any subsequent thinking we might do. Rather than thinking about what X is or how X operates, we lock ourselves prematurely into proving that were right to think that X should be banned or supported.

Ultimately, analytical thinking does need to arrive at a point of view – which is a form of judgment – but analytical conclusions are usually not phased in terms of like/dislike or good/bad. They disclose what a person has come to understand about X rather than how he or she imperiously rules on the worth of X.

### How do you avoid this?

Do not assert an agreement or disagreement with another person’s position until you can repeat that position in a way the other person would accept as fair an accurate.

Try eliminating the word “should” from your vocabulary for a while. The analytical mind is characterized by the words “why,” “how,” and “what.” “What is the aim of the new law?” Judgments take the form of should statements. “We should pass the law.”

Try eliminating evaluative adjectives – those that offer judgment with no data.

### Debate-Style Argument

As with generalizations and judgments, debate-style arguments are not all bad. They train writers to consider more than one viewpoint, their opponents as well as their own. The problem is that there are often more than two sides to an argument and that it produces a frame of mind in which defending positions matters more than taking the necessary time to develop ideas worth defending. People become more interested in winning than in being right.

### How do you avoid this?

* Temporarily suspend the pro/con, debate-style habit of mind.
* Understand the distinction between “argument” and “analysis.” Argument asks, “What can be said with truth about X or Y?” Analysis asks,” What does X or Y mean? Sometimes you will be asked to do both, but remember that they serve different functions.

## Overpersonalizing (Naturalizing our Assumptions)

The assumption that what seems true to me must be obviously and self-evidently true to everybody else is known as naturalizing your assumptions. The word “naturalize” in this context means that you are representing – and seeing – your own assumptions as part of the universal scheme of things. In general, this si not a bad thing to do, but we need to remember that no writing is strictly personal; it is influenced by forces outside of the self – social, cultural, educational, historical, etc.

The problem comes when relating to someone’s story becomes a habitual substitute for thinking through the ideas and the attitudes that the story suggests.

### How do you avoid this?

* Become more self-conscious about your habit of naturalizing.
* Ask yourself, “Is this what I really believe?”

## Opinions (versus Ideas)

It is said that everyone has one and that everyone is entitled to one. This is certainly true to an extent; there are sometimes consequences for expressing an opinion, especially if it is based on falsehood and its intent is to harm others. We need to remember that our opinions are learned. They are products of our culture and our upbringing – not personal possessions. Learning and our cultural experiences can change, which, in turn, should result in a change of opinion. However, a problem can occur when opinions are not open to this kind of examination and they are treated as sacred. Because of this, people often believe in things that they cannot prove, and may be hesitant to subject their opinion to the strain of reasoning or evidence.

From: Rosenwasser & Stephen, *Writing Analytically with Readings*. p.17-24