single photographs of Thompson Hall, a beautiful brick building on campus. Coincidentally, all were taken from the same angle and distance—straight on and across the street—which is the same shot that appears in the college recruiting catalog. For the next assignment, I asked my students to take multiple shots of a single subject, varying angle and distance. Several students went back to Thompson Hall and discovered a building they’d never seen before, though they walk by it every day. Students took abstract shots of the pattern of brickwork, unsettling shots of the clock tower looming above, and arresting shots of wrought iron fire escapes, clinging in a tangle to the wall.

The closer students got to their subjects, the more they began to see what they had never noticed before. The same is true in writing. As you move in for a closer look at some aspect of a larger subject, you will begin to uncover information that you—and ultimately your readers—are likely to find less familiar and more interesting. One writing term for this is focusing. (The photographic equivalent would be distance from the subject.)

**From Landscape Shots to Close-Ups**

The research reports many of us wrote in high school typically involved landscape photography. We tried to cram into one picture as much information as we could. A research report is a long shot. The college research essay is much more of a close-up, which means narrowing the boundaries of a topic as much as you can, always working for a more detailed look at some smaller part of the landscape.

You are probably not a photographer, and finding a narrow focus and fresh angle on your research topic is not nearly as simple as it might be if this were a photography exercise. But the idea is the same. You need to see your topic in as many ways as you can, hunting for the angle that most interests you; then go in for a closer look. One way to find your focus is to find your questions.

**Exercise 1.4**

Finding the Questions

Although you can do this exercise on your own, your instructor will likely ask that you do it in class this week. That way, students can help each other. (If you do try this on your own, only do Steps 3 and 4 in your research notebook.)
STEP 1: Take a piece of paper or a large piece of newsprint, and post it on the wall. At the very top of the paper, write the title of your tentative topic (e.g., *Plastics in the Ocean*).

STEP 2: Take a few minutes to briefly describe why you chose the topic.

STEP 3: Spend five minutes or so briefly listing what you know about your topic already (e.g., any surprising facts or statistics, the extent of the problem, important people or institutions involved, key schools of thought, common misconceptions, observations you've made, important trends, major controversies, etc.).

STEP 4: Now spend fifteen or twenty minutes brainstorming a list of questions about your topic that you'd like to answer through your research. Make this list as long as you can; try to see your topic in as many ways as possible. Push yourself on this; it's the most important step.

STEP 5: As you look around the room, you'll see a gallery of topics and questions on the walls. At this point in the research process, almost everyone will be struggling to find her focus. You can help each other. Move around the room, reviewing the topics and questions other students have generated. For each topic posted on the wall, do two things: Add a question you would like answered about that topic that's not on the list, and check the one question on the list you find most interesting. (It may or may not be the one you added.)

If you do this exercise in class, when you return to your newsprint, note the question about your topic that garnered the most interest. This may not be the one that interests you the most, and you may choose to ignore it altogether. But it is helpful to get some idea of what typical readers might want most to know about your topic.

You also might be surprised by the rich variety of topics other students have tentatively chosen for their research projects. The last time I did this exercise, I had students propose papers on controversial issues such as the use of dolphins in warfare, homelessness, the controversy over abolishment of fraternities, legalization of marijuana, and censorship of music. Other students proposed somewhat more personal issues, such as growing up with an alcoholic father, date rape, women in abusive relationships, and the effects of divorce on children. Still other students wanted to learn about more historical subjects, including the
role of Emperor Hirohito in World War II, the student movement in the 1960s, and the Lizzie Borden murder case. A few students chose topics that were local. For example, one student recently researched the plight of 19th-century Chinese miners digging for gold in the mountains just outside of Boise. Another did an investigation of skateboard culture in town, a project that involved field observation, interviews, as well as library research.

**EXERCISE 1.5**

**Finding the Focusing Question**

Review the questions you or the rest of the class generated in Exercise 1.4, Steps 4 and 5, and ask yourself, Which questions on the list am I most interested in that could be the focus of my paper? Remember, you’re not committing yourself yet.

**STEP 1:** Write the one question that you think would be the most interesting focus for your paper on the top of a fresh piece of newsprint or paper: This is your focusing question.

**STEP 2:** Now build a new list of questions under the first one. What else do you need to know to answer your focusing question? For example, suppose your focusing question is, Why do some colleges use unethical means to recruit athletes? To explore that focus, you might need to find out:

- Which colleges or universities have the worst records of unethical activities in recruiting?
- In which sports do these recruiting practices occur most often? Why?
- What are the NCAA rules about recruiting?
- What is considered an unethical practice?
- What efforts have been undertaken to curb bad practices?

Many of these questions may already appear on the lists you and the class generated, so keep them close at hand and mine them for ideas. Examine your tentative focusing question carefully for clues about what you might need to know. See also the box “Methods for Focusing Your Paper: An Example,” which describes how one student completed this exercise.