



Lesson 2.2

Avoid the Wandering Spotlight

The theater goes dark. The curtains open. The spotlight clicks on, illuminating an actor who is speaking the opening lines of a play. Suddenly, the spotlight jumps from the actor to an audience member in the front row, then to the ceiling, and then back to the now confused actor who continues to speak—forgetting a line or two. Imagine the people in the audience as they try to concentrate on the play. What will they remember most about this experience—the performance or the wandering spotlight?

When a writer takes the “spotlight” away from the main topic, readers have trouble following the story or conversation. Like the confused audience in the theater, they get distracted. Give your readers some guidance by keeping the spotlight focused on the main message.

Sharing an Example: “Night Sky”

Carefully read “Night Sky” aloud, quietly. Try to identify the writer’s big idea and ask yourself, “Where is that spotlight focused? *Is that spotlight focused?*”

Night Sky

Ever since I can remember, *my mother* has told me about the constellations and their stories. Orion, Cassiopeia, Taurus, and Draco have always been *my favorites*. When I see them now, I don’t *just see* the stars; I see the tragedy or the heroism behind



these characters' lives. Heroes nowadays are a lot different. They're people you hear about on the news. There's so much violence that sometimes I don't like to even watch the news. I can keep up on the Internet, and that lets me choose the stories I want to hear, or even write in my own opinions. One of my favorite stargazing memories is when I was maybe three or four. It was really cold—I think it was January—so my mom and I both snuggled inside the same sleeping bag to keep warm. She pointed out the prominent three stars that make up Orion's belt. The three stars are also known as the Three Kings, the Magi, and the Arrow. Whenever I hear that name the Magi, I think of "The Gift of the Magi," a short story by O. Henry that we had to read for school. I wrote a paper about it, and if you haven't read it, you should. It is really good, and you will not guess the ending.

Reflection

As a reader, what are your thoughts about "Night Sky"?

- The writer kept the spotlight focused right on the main idea.
- The writer wandered once—but came right back.
- This writer's spotlight bounced around like a dizzy firefly!

Based on your reading, what do you think is the main idea of "Night Sky"? Share your thoughts here: _____

Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in your writing circle to share your thoughts about "Night Sky." Does this writer have more than one main idea? Can she connect her ideas—and if so, how would she do that?



Refocusing

Read “Night Sky” again with a pen or pencil in hand. As you read, draw a line through parts you think are best left for another time. When you finish, read what is left to see if it is focused and makes sense. **HINT:** What you choose to cross out will depend on how you define the main message.

Share with a partner and assess your work:

- I didn’t cut enough. That spotlight is still bouncing around.
- I cut a lot. Now the paper is mostly about constellations.
- I cut enough to create a new main idea.

Planning to Stay Focused

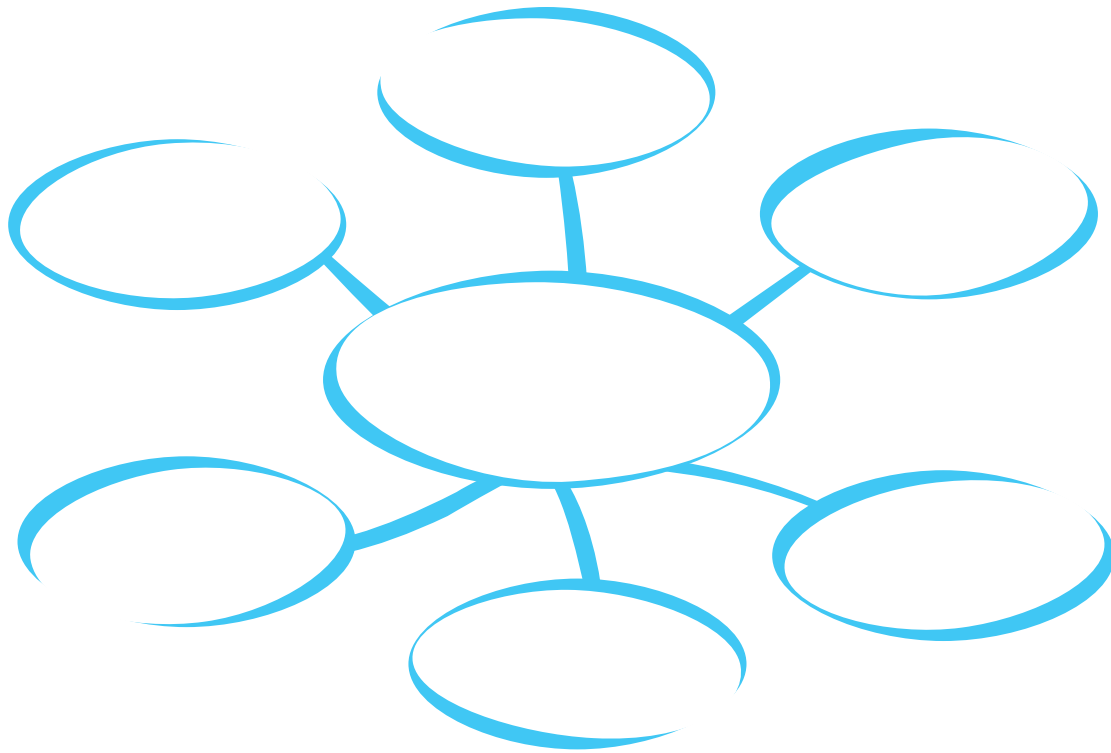
Focus doesn’t just happen. It comes from

- having a clear main message.
- connecting all pieces within the writing to that message.

Here’s your chance to plan your writing in a way that will keep the main message right in the spotlight. First, you need a topic. Take a “thinking minute” and see if you can recall a memory vivid enough to describe in one or two paragraphs. It could be

- a recent memory.
- something from your early childhood.

We’ve started an idea web for you on the next page to help you plan. Once you know which memory to write about, write a word or phrase that describes it right in the middle, inside the big circle. Then, fill in connected details—as fast as you can think of them—in the outer circles. Add more circles as you need them. You are the writer. Only YOU know how many details you need.



Creating a Focused Draft

How do you know when your web is done? Something in your head says, “I’m ready to write.” And you begin to see your draft in your mind—like those constellation pictures in the sky. It might be

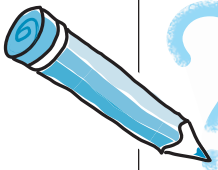
- a poem
- a memoir
- a description
- a character sketch

or something else. Write what you see in your mind—and keep going for 10 minutes or more, nonstop. Use your own paper.



Share and Compare

Meet with a partner or in a writing circle to share your memory drafts. Listen carefully as each writer shares. How many different forms did they take? Write what you think is the writer's main message on an index card, fold it in half, and hand it to the writer. Do not look at ANY cards until everyone has shared. Then take a look at your cards. Did your message get through? Or did your listeners hear a different message?



A Writer's Questions

Do you suppose professional writers always start out with a clear focus on the main message or do they wander sometimes? Can wandering even be a good thing? Why? How could you use it as a writer?



Putting It to the Test

When you're taking a writing test, sticking with a main message is VERY important because you are responding to someone else's prompt, not your own. What are some good tips for not wandering in this situation?