6. Repeat steps 2, 3, 4, and 5 several times, until you are satisfied that the thesis statement accounts for your evidence as fully and accurately as possible. This is to say that the procedure for making a thesis evolve is recursive: it requires you to go over the same ground repeatedly, formulating successive versions of the thesis that are increasingly accurate in wording and idea.

As an overarching guideline, acknowledge the questions that each new formulation of the thesis prompts you to ask. The thesis develops through successive complications. Allowing your thesis to run up against potentially conflicting evidence ("but what about this?") enables you to build upon your initial idea, extending the range of evidence it can accurately account for by clarifying and qualifying its key terms.

**Evolving a Thesis in an Exploratory Draft: A Student Draft on Las Meninas**

The example is a student writer's exploratory draft on a painting called *Las Meninas* (Spanish for "the ladies-in-waiting") by the seventeenth-century painter Diego Velázquez. We have, by the way, selected a paper on a painting because all of the student's data (the painting) is on one page where you can keep referring back to it, trying to share in the writer's thought process. The method of analysis used here will, however, work with anything, print or nonprint.

Look at the painting in Figure 9.3, and then read the student's draft. As you read, you will notice that much of the essay consists of list-like description, which leaves it somewhat unfocused. But careful description is a necessary stage in moving toward interpretations of evidence, especially in an exploratory draft in which the writer is not yet committed to any single position. Notice how the writer's word choice in her descriptions prompts various kinds of interpretive leaps. We have added in brackets our observations about how the writer's thinking is proceeding, and we have used underlining to track her various attempts at formulating a thesis.

As should be clear, we have incorporated into the six steps several of the observation and interpretation strategies from Unit I, especially Notice and Focus, The Method, Interesting and Strange from Chapter 3, A Toolkit or Analytical Methods; and So what? from Chapter 4, Interpretation: What It Is, What It Isn't, and How to Do It.

**Velázquez's Intentions in Las Meninas**

[1] Velázquez has been noted as being one of the best Spanish artists of all time. It seems that as Velázquez got older, his paintings became better. Toward the end of his life, he painted his masterpiece, *Las Meninas*. Out of all his works, *Las Meninas* is the only known self-portrait of Velázquez. There is much to be said about *Las Meninas*.

The painting is very complex, but some of the intentions that Velázquez had in painting *Las Meninas* are very clear. *(The writer opens with background information and a broad working thesis (underlined).)*
First, we must look at the painting as a whole. The question that must be answered is, Who is in the painting? The people are all members of the Royal Court of the Spanish monarch Philip IV. In the center is the king’s daughter, who eventually became Empress of Spain. Around her are her meninas or ladies-in-waiting. These meninas are all daughters of influential men. To the right of the meninas are dwarfs who are servants, and the family dog who looks fierce but is easily tamed by the foot of the little child. The more unique people in the painting are Velázquez himself, who stands to the left in front of a large canvas; the king and queen, whose faces are captured in the obscure mirror; the man in the doorway; and the nun and man behind the meninas. To analyze this painting further, the relationship between characters must be understood. [The writer describes the evidence and arrives at an operating assumption—focusing on the relationship among characters.]

FIGURE 9.3
Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez, 1656. Approximately 10'5" × 9'. Museo del Prado, Madrid.
[3] Where is this scene occurring? Most likely it is in the palace. But why is there no visible furniture? Is it because Velázquez didn’t want the viewers to become distracted from his true intentions? I believe it is to show that this is not just a painting of an actual event. This is an event out of his imagination. [The writer begins pushing observations to tentative conclusions by asking So what?]

[4] Now, let us become better acquainted with the characters. The child in the center is the most visible. All the light is shining on her. Maybe Velázquez is suggesting that she is the next light for Spain and that even God has approved her by shining all the available light on her. Back in those days there was a belief in the divine right of kings, so this just might be what Velázquez is saying. [The writer starts ranking evidence for importance and continues to ask, So what?; she arrives in the underlined sentence at a possible interpretation of the painter’s intention.]

[5] The next people of interest are the ones behind the meninas. The woman in the habit might be a nun and the man a priest.

[6] The king and queen are the next group of interesting people. They are in the mirror, which is to suggest they are present, but they are not as visible as they might be. Velázquez suggests that they are not always at the center where everyone would expect them to be. [The writer continues using Notice and Focus and asking So what?; the writer has begun tackling evidence that might conflict with her first interpretation.]

[7] The last person and the most interesting is Velázquez. He dominates the painting along with the little girl. He takes up the whole left side along with his gigantic easel. But what is he painting? As I previously said, he might be painting the king and queen. But I also think he could be pretending to paint us, the viewers. The easel really gives this portrait an air of mystery because Velázquez knows that we, the viewers, want to know what he is painting. [The writer starts doing 10 on 1 with her selection of the most significant detail.]

[8] The appearance of Velázquez is also interesting. His eyes are focused outward here. They are not focused on what is going on around him. It is a steady stare. Also interesting is his confident stance. He was confident enough to place himself in the painting of the royal court. I think that Velázquez wants the king to give him the recognition he deserves by including him in the "family." And the symbol on his vest is the symbol given to a painter by the king to show that his status and brilliance have been appreciated by the monarch. It is unknown how it got there. It is unlikely that Velázquez put it there himself. That would be too outright, and Velázquez was the type to give his messages subtly. Some say that after Velázquez’s death, King Philip IV himself painted it to finally give Velázquez the credit he deserved for being a loyal friend and servant. [The writer continues doing 10 on 1 and asking So what?; she arrives at three tentative theses (underlined).]

[9] I believe that Velázquez was very ingenious by putting his thoughts and feelings into a painting. He didn’t want to offend the king who had done so much for him. It paid off for Velázquez because he did finally get what he wanted, even if it was after he died. [The writer concludes and is now ready to redraft to tighten links between evidence and claims, formulate a better working thesis, and make this thesis evolve.]
Characteristics of an Exploratory Draft

Although its thinking is still underdeveloped, this version of the student’s paper is a good exploratory draft. The writer has begun to interpret details and draw plausible conclusions from what she sees, rather than just describing (summarizing) the scene depicted on the canvas or responding loosely to it with her unanalyzed impressions.

The paper is typical of an early draft in several ways:

- It is written more for the writer as a form of inquiry than for readers. The writer reports her thoughts as they occur, but she doesn’t always explain how she arrived at them or how they connect to each other.

- A recognizable thesis doesn’t emerge until near the end (in paragraph 8), probably at the point where the writer became able to formulate the idea her evidence has directed her to.

- The paper contains more than one potential thesis, ideas that are related but still inadequately connected. The writer appears not to be sufficiently aware that there are different ideas competing for control of the paper.

- The paper ignores the conflict between its various theses and some of its evidence.

- The writer tends to end paragraphs with promising observations and then walk away, leaving the observations undeveloped. Rather than draw out the implications of her observations, she halts her thinking too soon in order to move on to the next piece of evidence. As we illustrate later, the writer can remedy this problem by querying her observations with the question So what?

- Typically, first drafts contain undeveloped observations because they are not organized in a way that allows for development. See, for example, this writer’s repeated return to paragraph openings using “next” and “also,” which traps her into listing parallel examples rather than building connections among them. As a rule, the use of these terms (and “another”) at points of transition traps writers in repetition, preventing them from seeing opportunities to advance their ideas. (See What’s Wrong with Five-Paragraph Form? in Chapter 8.)

The purpose of the exploratory draft is to use writing as a means of arriving at a working thesis that your next draft can more fully evolve. Most writers find that potential theses emerge near the end of the exploratory draft—which is the case in the student draft (see the three claims that are underlined in paragraph 8).

What is especially good about the draft is that it reveals the writer’s willingness to push on from her first idea (reading the painting as an endorsement of the divine right of kings, expressed by the light shining on the princess) by seeking out complicating evidence. This first idea does not account for enough of the evidence and is undermined by evidence that clearly doesn’t fit, such as the small size and decentering of the king and queen, and the large size and foregrounding of the painter himself.

Rather than ignoring these potentially troublesome details, the writer instead zooms in on them, making the painter’s representation of himself and of his
employers the 1 for doing 10 on 1 (making a number of observations about a single representative piece of evidence and analyzing it in depth).

Now what? The writer is ready to rewrite the paper in order to choose and better define her thesis. She might first wish to step back a bit from her initial formulations by using The Method to again survey the details of the painting, looking for patterns of repetition and contrast.

Examples of exact or nearly exact repetitions:

The pictures in the background

The fact that both the dwarf and the painter, each on his own side of the painting, stare confidently and directly at the viewer

Examples of strands (repetition of the same or similar kind of detail):

Details having to do with family

Servants: dwarf, meninos, dog? painter?

Details having to do with art and the making of art: easel, brush, paintings on wall

Examples of organizing contrasts—binaries:

Royalty/commoners

Employers/servants

Large/small

Foreground/background

Central (prominent)/marginalized (less prominent)

Having used The Method to see the evidence anew, the writer would be ready to try the six steps for making the thesis evolve. She'd begin by noticing that, as is the case in most exploratory drafts, she has several potential thesis statements vying for control of the paper.

**Applying the Six Steps to the Draft on Las Meninas**

**Step 1.** Formulate a working thesis.

As a general rule, you should assume the presence of multiple, often competing theses, some of which you may not have yet detected. In the Las Meninas paper, as is often the case in early drafts, no single idea emerges clearly as the thesis. Instead, we get three related but not entirely compatible ideas vying for control of the paper (all in paragraph 8):

“I think that Velázquez wants the king to . . .”

**Thesis 1:** Give Velázquez “the recognition he deserves by including him in the ‘family.’”

**Thesis 2:** “[H]ow that his [Velázquez’s] status and brilliance [as an artist] have been appreciated.”

**Thesis 3:** Give Velázquez “the credit he deserved for being a loyal friend and servant.”
These three ideas about the painter's intentions could be made to work together, but at present the writer is left with an uneasy fit among them.

**Step 2.** See how far you can make each thesis go in accounting for evidence.

Each of the three potential thesis ideas explains some of the evidence. The writer should try on each one to see what it helps to explain.

**Thesis 1:** Painting as bid for inclusion in the family

_Evidence:_ The painter's inclusion of himself with the family—the king, queen, and princess—in a fairly domestic scene

**Thesis 2:** Painting as bid for appreciation of painter's status and brilliance as an artist

_Evidence:_ Prominence of easel and brush and painter himself in the painting; painter's confident stare and the apparent decentering of king and queen; painting set in artist's studio—his space

**Thesis 3:** Painting as bid for credit for being loyal friend and servant

_Evidence:_ Painter's location of himself among other loyal servants at court (ladies in waiting, dog, and large dwarf)

**Step 3.** Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by each thesis.

**Step 4.** Make explicit the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence.

What happens when the writer begins to search for evidence that doesn't seem to be adequately accounted for by her various thesis formulations?

**Thesis 1:** Painting as bid for inclusion in the family

_Evidence mismatches:_ Presence of painter among servants; foregrounding of servants in image and in painting's title (The Ladies in Waiting)—painter's large size (larger than king and queen) does not go with the idea of inclusion, and emphasis on servants does not go with inclusion in royal family

**Thesis 2:** Painting as bid for appreciation of painter's status and brilliance as an artist

_Evidence mismatches:_ Prominence of other servants in the painting; emphasis on family as much as or more than on artist himself; if bidding for status, painter would not present himself as just one of the servants, nor might he give so much attention to the princess (and the king and queen's regard for her)

**Thesis 3:** Painting as bid for credit for being loyal friend and servant

_Evidence mismatches:_ Painter's prominence; his confident stare; prominence of easel and brush; small size of king and queen (smaller than servants)—if painter wished to emphasize loyalty and service, his subordinate relationship to the more powerful at court, he would have made himself and the tools of his trade less important
**Step 5.** Choose the claim that seems to account for the most evidence and then re-shape that claim to better accommodate evidence that doesn’t fit.

When you’ve found conflicting or inadequately explained evidence, try using it to evolve your existing thesis rather than beating a too-hasty retreat. The direction in which the writer’s thinking is moving—that the painting asks for someone’s strengths to be recognized—is not an entirely new start. The shift she is apparently making but not yet overtly articulating is from the painting as showcase of royal power to the painting as showcase of the painter’s own power.

To better formulate this claim, the writer should query what she is emphasizing as the primary feature of her evidence: size, especially that of the king and queen versus the painter. She could do this by pushing her thinking with the question So what?

- **So what** that the king and queen are small, but the painter, princess, and dwarf (another servant) are all large and fairly equal in size and/or prominence?
- **So what** that there are size differences in the painting? What might large or small size mean?

Here are possible answers to the So what? questions:

- Perhaps the relative size and/or prominence of figures in the painting can be read as indicators of their importance or of what the painter wants to say about their importance.
- Perhaps the king and queen have been reduced so that Velázquez can showcase their daughter, the princess.
- Perhaps the size and physical prominence of the king and queen are relatively unimportant. In that case, what matters is that they are a presence, always overseeing events (an idea implied but not developed by the writer in paragraph 6).
- Perhaps the painter is demonstrating his own ability to make the king and queen any size—any level of importance—he chooses. Although the writer does not overtly say so, the king and queen are among the smallest as well as the least visible figures.

Given these answers to the So what? questions, the writer should probably choose thesis 2—that the painting is a bid for recognition of the painter’s status and brilliance as an artist—because this thesis explains more of the evidence than anything else the writer has come up with so far. It explains, for example, the painter’s prominence and the relative insignificance of the monarchs: that the painter, in effect, creates their stature (size, power) in the world through his paintings. Framed in a mirror and appearing to hang on the wall, the king and queen are, arguably, suspended among the painter’s paintings, mere reflections of themselves—or, rather, the painter’s reflection of them.

**Step 6.** Repeat steps 2 through 5 as necessary.

The writer would probably want to concentrate on repeating Step 2, seeing how far she can go in making her revised thesis account for additional evidence.

*Thesis:* painting as bid for appreciation of painter’s status and brilliance as an artist

**Step 2 repeated.** See how far you can make each thesis go in accounting for evidence.
Evidence:

- If the painter is demonstrating that he can make the members of the royal family any size he wants, then the painting not only is a bid for recognition but also can be seen as a playful though not-so-subtle threat: be aware of my power and treat me well, or else suffer the consequences. As artist, the painter decides how the royal family will be seen. The king and queen depend on the painter, as they do in a different way on the princess, with whom Velázquez makes himself equal in prominence, to extend and perpetuate their power.

- In subverting viewers' expectations both by centering the monarchs and concealing what is on the easel, the painter again emphasizes his power, in this case, over the viewers (among whom might be the king and queen if their images on the back wall are mirror reflections of them standing, like us, in front of the painting). He is not bound by their expectations and in fact appears to use those expectations to manipulate the viewers: he can make them wish to see something he has the power to withhold.

- The large dwarf in the right-hand foreground is positioned in a way that links him with the painter. The dwarf arguably furthers the painting's message and does so, like much else in the painting, in the form of a loaded joke: the small ("dwarfed" by the power of others) are brought forward and made big.

Knowing When to Stop: How Much Revising Is Enough?

We emphasize before leaving this example that the version of the thesis that we have just proposed is not necessarily the "right" answer. Looked at in a different context, the painting might have been explained primarily as a demonstration of the painter's mastery of the tools of his trade—light, for example, and perspective. But our proposed revision of the thesis for the Las Meninas paper meets two important criteria for evaluating thesis statements:

1. It unifies the observations the writer has made.
2. It is capable of accounting for a wide range of evidence.

The writer has followed through on her original desire to infer Velázquez's intentions in the painting. As we argued in Chapter 4 (Interpretation: What It Is, What It Isn't, and How to Do It), whether or not Velázquez consciously intended to make his painting a tongue-in-cheek self-advertisement, there is clearly enough evidence to claim plausibly that the painting can be understood in this way.

How do you know when you've done enough reformulating of your thesis and arrived at the best possible idea about your evidence? Getting the thesis to account for (respond to) all rather than just some of your evidence does not mean that you need to discuss every detail of the subject. Writers (rather like trial lawyers) must take care not to ignore important evidence, especially if it would alter their "case," but no analysis can address everything—nor should it. Your job as a writer is to select those features of your subject that seem most significant and to argue for their significance. An analysis says to readers, in effect, "These are the details that best reveal
the nature and meaning of my subject, or at least the part of the subject that I am trying to address.”

**EVOLVING A THESIS IN A LATER-STAGE DRAFT: THE EXAMPLE OF EDUCATING RITA**

In this chapter’s final example we again apply the six steps, but in this case we are using them to make a thesis evolve within the draft, rather than to select among various as yet unformed competitors for the role of thesis (as was the case with *Las Meninas*). The process of thesis evolution that we trace here would remain visible in the writer’s final draft as a means of sharing her thought processes with her readers. By contrast, the writer of *Las Meninas* would probably not include in her final draft the competition among her three potential thesis statements—only the evolution of the “winning” one.

In the film *Educating Rita*, a working-class English hairdresser (Rita) wants to change her life by taking courses from a professor (Frank) at the local university, even though this move threatens her relationship with her husband (Denny), who burns her books and pressures her to quit school and get pregnant. Frank, she discovers, has his own problems: he’s a divorced alcoholic who is bored with his life, bored with his privileged and complacent students, and bent on self-destruction. The film follows the growth of Frank and Rita’s friendship and the changes it brings about in their lives. By the end of the film, each has left a limiting way of life behind and has set off in a seemingly more promising direction. She leaves her constricting marriage, passes her university examinations with honors, and begins to view her life in terms of choices; he stops drinking and sets off, determined but sad, to make a new start as a teacher in Australia.

**Step 1.** Formulate an idea about your subject, a working thesis.

*Working thesis: Educating Rita* celebrates the liberating potential of education.

The film’s relatively happy ending and the presence of the word *educating* in the film’s title make this thesis a reasonable opening claim.

**Step 2.** See how far you can make this thesis go in accounting for evidence.

The working thesis seems compatible, for example, with Rita’s achievement of greater self-awareness and independence. She becomes more articulate, which allows her to free herself from otherwise disabling situations. She starts to think about other kinds of work she might do, rather than assuming that she must continue in the one job she has always done. She travels, first elsewhere in England and then to the Continent. So the thesis checks out as viable: there is enough of a match with evidence to stick with and evolve it.

**Steps 3 and 4.** Locate evidence that is not adequately accounted for by the thesis, and ask *So what?* about the apparent mismatch between the thesis and selected evidence.

Some evidence reveals that the thesis as stated is not the whole picture. Rita’s education causes her to become alienated from her husband, her parents, and her social class; at the end of the film she is alone and unsure about her direction in life.