

Intermediate
A1
Focus

The Case of the Wandering Writer

This lesson will help you see how a piece of writing gets off track when the writer loses focus.

You visit your neighbor and find him chewing on a pen. He removes the pen from his mouth long enough to growl, “There are too many stray dogs running loose in Winfield Park! The city needs to put up a fence, and I’m writing a letter to the editor of the newspaper to tell them so!”

Mr. Citizen holds strong convictions, but **his letter is weak**. Here is the letter he mailed to the newspaper:



Dear Editor:

As a kid I used to play in Winfield Park. In the summer we played softball and in the winter they flooded the park and we ice skated. Now people in the neighborhood let their dogs run loose.

We lived near the park but we never let our dog run loose. Her name was Scooter. The park needs a fence around it. Scooter never bit anybody but some of these dogs that run in the park now are mean. People don’t show respect anymore. They bring their boom boxes to the park and turn them up really loud.

Last week somebody spray-painted the park shelter. The fool who did that should have to clean it up. When we ice skated, we built bonfires and toasted marshmallows. Sometimes I brought Scooter with me, but she was always on a leash, except when I turned her loose to chase Jimmy Peterson. I guess we’d all like the old neighborhoods to stay the same, but they don’t.



*Sincerely yours,
I. Rate Citizen*

To illustrate the letter's weakness, we'll use **a pair of binoculars** (imaginary).

If you go outdoors and glance around, you see the general surroundings. You don't pay much attention to details. If you look through binoculars, your outlook changes. You **focus** on a specific subject.



You restrict your view in order to zero in on what interests you most.

When Mr. Citizen began to write, he was focused on one subject: a fence around Winfield Park. As he wrote, he "put down his binoculars" and **let his mental gaze wander**. The fence got lost in the landscape of other ideas.

Principle: When you write, have a purpose.

Secondary principle: Stick with your purpose.

Mr. Citizen does make one clear statement of his reason for writing. That is the letter's **main point**.

The letter has other statements which do not specifically mention the main point, but which help build the writer's case. Those are **supporting points**.

The letter includes ideas which don't fit the writer's purpose at all. Those are **tangents**.

Figure out how and where Mr. Citizen's letter wanders from its purpose. Here are several possible ways to analyze the letter without writing in this book:

- On separate paper, write the headings *Main Point*, *Supporting Point*, *Tangent*, and *Not Sure*. Copy sentences or phrases from the original letter under those headings.

(or)

- Photocopy page 8 and mark up the letter with these symbols:

* main point + supporting point - tangent ? not sure

... or mark those same features with distinctive colors.

(or)

- Lay a clear plastic sheet over page 8; mark the letter with the four symbols or colors.

Save your work; you will use it in Lesson 2.