

# Performance Cues

## Complimentary Teachers' Notes

For

# COSI

by Louis Nowra

Presented by La Boite Theatre  
and Queensland Performing Arts Centre

Optus Playhouse, QPAC  
6 – 22 February, 2003



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*Performance Cues* Writer - Sandra Gattenhof with thanks to Belinda Macartney (QPAC), Rosemary Herbert and Tamsin Roseveare, (La Boite Theatre), Peter Rogers (Stuartholme) and Sue Lawson (Villanova College).

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## PERFORMANCE CUES

### **How to use this guide**

*Performance Cues* is a guide designed to enhance students' knowledge about, and responses to, performance experiences. It provides information about the performance, student activities, advice about audience roles and responsibilities, and resources for further investigation by students and teachers.

*Performance Cues* gives you, the educator, the ability to prepare your students for the process of reading and interpreting a performance whether that be through performance themes, form and style, or design elements.

Experience and research indicate that students' understanding of, and responses to, performance are enhanced through sound educational experiences. This material will help you lead students to discover information, to explore processes, and to respond in critical and creative ways.

Because teachers are accountable for how students use time during the school day, time at performances, like time in the classroom, must be justified for educational value. *Performance Cues* ensures that learning outcomes for performances are both appropriate and clear.

The activities have been arranged in a three-phase sequence of Orientating, Enhancing and Synthesising.

As an educator, you may like to make use of all the activities in this guide to prepare your students to view and unpack the performance. However, La Boite also understands that your visit to a performance is not a one off event, but forms part of a larger unit of classroom work – an investigation into Australian drama, the playwrighting process, the use of the elements of drama within a theatrical performance, or enabling students to analyse a performance work using the structures of theatre criticism. Therefore you may not wish to use all the suggested activities, but 'pick and mix' what is appropriate for your classroom work and your students.

Your feedback on the usefulness of the material in these notes is valued. If you would like to pass on any comments, please contact La Boite Theatre on (07) 3010 2611 or Education Manager, QPAC on (07) 3842 9474.

**PLAY 1: COSI by Louis Nowra**  
**Presented by La Boite and Queensland Performing Arts Centre (QPAC)**

**Season:** 6 – 22 February  
**Previews:** 4, 5 February  
**Post-Show Discussion:** 14 February  
**Venue:** Optus Playhouse, QPAC

**Director:** Adam Cook  
**Designer:** Dan Potra  
**Lighting Designer:** Matt Scott  
**Cast:** Brian Cavanagh as Henry  
Karen Crone as Cherry  
Paul Denny as Nick/Justin  
Julie Eckersley as Lucy/Julie  
Eugene Gilfedder as Roy  
Caroline Kennison as Ruth  
Jason Klarwein as Lewis  
Hayden Spencer as Doug  
Adam Couper as Zac

### 1) Synopsis

First produced in 1992, COSI has become one of the most successful Australian plays produced in the last decade. A terrific play about madness, illusion, sanity...and theatre. "Real madness and angst only occurred when I worked with professional actors." Louis Nowra

In a mental institution in 1971, Lewis, a young director, takes on the task of mounting a production of Mozart's *Cosi Fan Tutte* in the burnt-out theatre while protests against the Vietnam War are being staged outside.

Semi-autobiographical in nature, Louis Nowra has written a play about theatre, madness, illusion, sanity and life. COSI explores a life lesson for Lewis, a young director who takes on the task of producing a play with the patients who live there. As his life is touched by these extraordinary people and his operatic production (*Cosi Fan Tutte*) lurches forward, we learn, along with Lewis, that when chasing your dreams it helps to be a little crazy.

On one level, COSI is a poignant look at life through the eyes of patients at an insane asylum. On another, it's an hilarious take on the madness of creative endeavour and the chaotic terror of getting up there and making a fool of yourself.

### 2) Key Learning Areas And Themes

This play supports the Key Learning Areas of:  
The Arts (Drama), English, Studies of Society and Environment and Health and Physical Education (Personal Development).

### 3) Issues

COSI deals with issues of obsessions, disillusionment and self-identity, struggle and triumph and mental illness.

### 4) Suggested topics for investigation

Theatre ensembles and ensemble works, Australian drama, the social construction and portrayal of mental illness, autobiographical storytelling, art therapy, opera, Australian involvement in the Vietnam War and black comedy.

## PRODUCTION SUPPORT MATERIALS

### 1) Content Suitability Advice

CONTENT SUITABILITY for COSI	
Year Levels	Years 11 -12
Language	Medium level coarse language
Sexual References	Low level
Setting	The time is 1971. The play is set in a mental institution in Melbourne.
CURRICULUM APPLICATIONS	
Drama	Australian drama Black comedy Meta-narrative
English	Creative non-fiction First person narratives Play text to screen text
Studies of Society and Environment	Australian involvement in the Vietnam War
Health and Physical Education	Adulthood Mental illness and treatment Phobias and obsessions

### 2) Complimentary Teachers' Notes – *Performance Cues*

Fully researched notes including background information, interviews with writers and directors, and suggested pre and post show curriculum activities will be made available to you by mail or email. *Performance Cues* can be downloaded from the Education section of La Boite's website at [www.laboite.com.au](http://www.laboite.com.au) or 'Supporting Materials' in the What's On section of QPAC's website [www.qpac.com.au](http://www.qpac.com.au)

### 3) Preview Opportunities

Two free tickets are available for teachers wishing to preview the production before the visit with their students. Invitations will be sent out prior to the evening preview sessions.

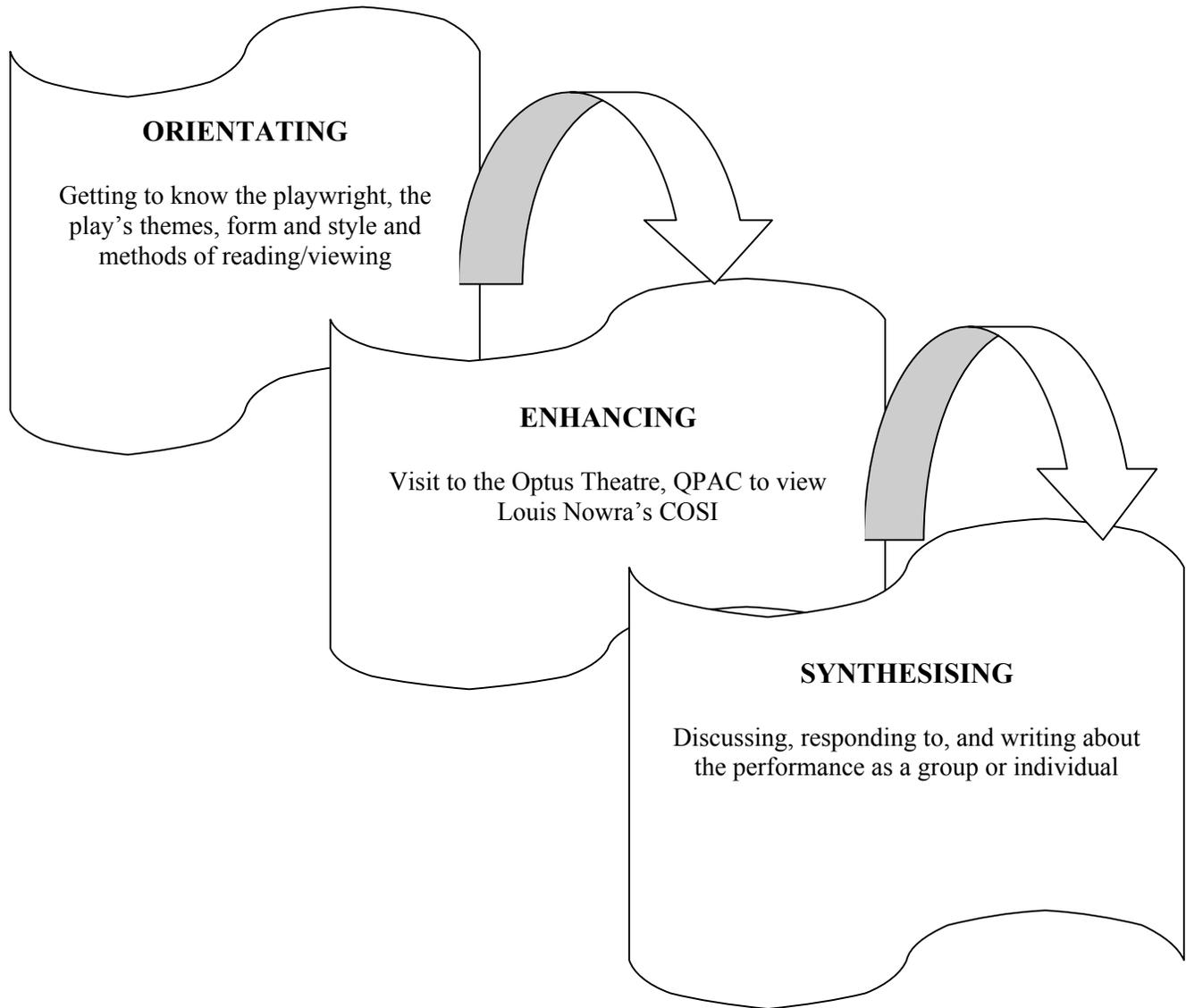
### 4) School Matinees and Bookings

Wed 5th Feb	11am Preview
Tues 11th Feb	11am
Tues 18th Feb	11am

Please note the following:

1. Schools may also make bookings at the special school rate for the Tuesday evening performances during the season of COSI. Schools receive 1 free ticket for each accompanying teacher per 10 students.
2. All Tuesday evening performances begin at **6.30pm**.

### THREE STEP PROCESS FOR VIEWING A PERFORMANCE



## ORIENTATING ACTIVITIES

### Who is Louis Nowra?

Edited version from Veronica Kelly's *The Theatre of Louis Nowra*.



In the quarter-century since 1973, in a career spanning writing for theatre, television, opera, film and fiction, Louis Nowra has established himself in the forefront of Australian theatre both in cultural prestige and, increasingly, commercial success. In a decentralised Australian theatre industry, and amid many brilliant contemporaries, Nowra has over this vigorous period sustained a prolific output and is even now only in mid-career. His theatre has both charted national concerns and challenged mainstage aesthetic practices. Over thirty original dramas and

translations of European plays theatricalise modern Australia's creative energies, comedy and nightmares, combining passionate and often idiosyncratic personal visions with the articulation of deeper communal concerns. The crises of a settler nation - Aboriginal dispossession, and Australia's involvement in imperial wars from the Western Front to Vietnam - are expressed in plays of comic energy and disturbing potency. Ironic Celtic yarn-spinning contextualises his portrayals of savage mutilations and shattered cultures wherein characters bear witness to the pressures of unfinished historical business. Recently *The Temple* (1993) and *The Incorruptible* (1995) have examined contemporary public figures: respectively the 1980s business entrepreneur and the populist politician.

Although his drama has been held in high critical esteem from the outset, this increasing commercial visibility would even a decade ago have appeared both surprising and unlikely. Initially Nowra was hailed - or lamented - as an 'internationalist' writer of dark and difficult high-culture parables; an idiosyncratic and austere theatricaliser of the violent and confronting rather than a celebrator or affirmer of comfortable local imagery. The early full-length plays were set in remote times and places - eighteenth-century Russia, nineteenth-century Paraguay, among the warlords of 1920s China - and appeared perversely to ignore the spirited theatrical recuperations of Australian events and personalities so significant to an enthusiastically nationalist period of playwriting. *Inside the Island* (1980) set in far western New South Wales before the Great War, confirmed that Australia's heterogenous spiritual history was always Nowra's main theme. *The Golden Age* (1985) confirmed Nowra as our foremost dramatic non-naturalist and anatomist of the complex interconnections and cross-identifications of Australian colonised and colonisers.

After a brief hiatus in stage writing Nowra returned to the theatre with *Capricornia* (1988) displaying a looser and more narrative-driven style; still epic and critical in its intentions but with a more transparent emotional texture. A fresh stylistic path is recently evident in the popular semi-autobiographical works *Summer of the Aliens* and *Così* (1992), which seem to confirm the emergence of a new approachable, popular and user-

friendly Nowra. This accessibly confiding and 'autobiographical' manoeuvre exhibits a sophisticated fictional game of comic invention and romantic self-revelation. *Cosí*, Nowra's most celebratory play cannibalising aristocratic culture, is perversely set in a 1970s Melbourne madhouse.

Nowra defines his theatrical aesthetic as 'detachment', a term with affective no less than methodological implications: 'being removed from people at the same time as liking them'. Towards evil and suffering, of which his plays show many examples, Nowra's 'detachment' likewise precludes easy horror and easy judgements alike. The urbane poise of the high comic vision is celebrated amidst the improvisational chaos of *Cosí* wherein obsessional and over-medicated asylum inmates rehearse and produce Mozart's opera:

Happy is the man who calmly takes life as he finds it  
And through the vicissitudes of life  
Lets himself be ruled by reason  
What makes another weep  
Will make him laugh  
And despite the tempests of his life  
He will find serenity and peace.

Nowra's early characters are typically the oppressed, the underdog, the racially marginalised and the mentally damaged. His theatre explores the rich and frightening 'jungle' of the human mind: its wilful intensity, its blinding visions, its creative adaptability, its terrors, suffering and its durability. The sense of the awesome expanse of Australian nature and the fragility of its white human occupation provides his characteristic background to an exploration of the tenuousness of what is called normality. For *Inside the Island*, he adapts Patrick White's phrase 'the country of the mind' as being the proper homeland of his landscape-oriented theatre. Such plays deal with the survivors of post-colonial Australia's legacies of class inequality, imperial racism, indigenous dispossession and the cultural displacements and hybridisations of a multicultural migrant society. Invasion, adaptation, resistance, renewal, metamorphosis and the amoral and transformative power of love are constant themes, typically figured through images of fires, exile, disease, madness and imprisonment. Countering these dynamic but dangerous forces is the isle of Cythera, Nowra's ambiguous image of ideal fulfilled love, whether lost or to be won. For *The Golden Age's* lost 'tribe' of white Australians, descendents of refugees from the convict hell of Van Diemen's Land, Nowra devised a syncretic and concretely sensual language made up of archaic British dialects, while the physical energy characteristically demanded of his performers is at its most intense. Within its story of a resilient oral culture all but destroyed by contact with 'civilisation', a story is discernible of the dispossession and shattered 'dreaming' of indigenous people. Nowra's vision of national history is a distinctively post-colonial one, where tragedy, romance and farce can collide in magic realist mode; where the inarticulate and marginalised possess strengths inaccessible to their oppressors; and where the traumas of the past erupt into the present to be rehearsed, replayed and refigured.

More consistently than any other mainstream Australian playwright, Nowra has written characters and created roles for a wide variety of ethnic and sexual identities. Non-English-speaking and Aboriginal characters and performers have had major implication and input in this theatre-making. Gay characters range from the warlord Bao of *The Precious Woman*, the camp ironist David of *Sunrise*, the dynastic Terry of *The Temple*, the passionate central relationship of *Deceit*, to the many urban inhabitants of *The Jungle's* gay scene. Lesbian love structures the relationships of *Spellbound* and unites the central couple of *The Widows*. Although Aboriginal experience can be understood as mutely informing the complex narratives of *Visions*, *Inside the Island* and *The Golden Age*, after the 1988 *Capricornia* adaptation Nowra created specifically Aboriginal roles. Along with *Byzantine Flowers* (1989), the play sequence *Capricornia*, *Crow* (1994) and *Radiance* (1993) forms an important narrative tetralogy of historical Aboriginal stories: a black version of Nowra's projected 'Empire' sequence (see below). Violent colonial history and the black heroine also occur in the Mozartian Bicentennial opera *Whitsunday*, set to music by Brian Howard. More powerfully than any other white Australian playwright, Nowra has traced the impact of the hybridised contemporary Aboriginal experience on the white imagination. His central characters, whether the powerful or the marginalised, are frequently women. Complaints of lack of good female roles do not apply within Nowra's dramaturgical practice; his casts are typically of equal gender distribution or predominantly female.

Dominant male roles appear in *The Temple's* ebullient crook Laurie Blake and *The Incorruptible's* Robespierre figure in Stafford. Through the former character, Nowra revisits and ironises a middle-class icon; appropriately in a farce satirising the fall of corporate Australia's deregulated financial idols. Laurie is a deliberate quotation of the male 'larrikin' or 'ocker' figure; a kind of national comic mask hybridised for middle-class consumption from parodies of working-class masculinist social styles. Through its ambiguous celebration and anxious interrogation of this pugnaciously demotic and masculinist mask figure, new-wave Australian theatre rose to national prominence in the late 1960s. By contrast, Nowra's plays embody with an unillusioned respect the historical and class consciousness of an older Australian working-class formation; of mostly Irish and other British-descended peoples whose tough realism and sardonic resilience survived the batterings of social marginalisation, imperial wars and economic depressions with a fair amount of their own vision and disrespect intact. However, Nowra is far from being a purist conservative. His theatre, screen work and fiction are deeply interested in international culture and postmodern fluid social identities, and particularly in the experience and impact of the newer Australian peoples; the migrants from over one hundred different countries who have altered the social texture of post-war society.

Nowra maintains strong demotic and popular tastes which draw upon an eclectic field of cultural reference. His subversive rewriting of international popular and pulp-fiction narratives and motifs is complemented by postmodern textual appropriations of sources ranging from Wagner to Kleist, Ovid to Daffy Duck, from Quentin Tarantino's lowlife dystopias to the outback folk ballads of Ted Egan. Nowra's theatre is a dynamic and richly-textured hybrid of competing stories and styles.

## **ORIENTATING ACTIVITIES**

### **Forming Understandings – guided reading of COSI**

To begin to understand Nowra's COSI, it is suggested that students have some engagement with the text. The following activities and questions will help you guide students through a reading of all or some of the more notable scenes in the play. The activities and their related tasks could be tackled in three ways. As:

- a guided whole class reading
- divided into small group within a class and assigned sections
- short homework activities after reading scenes of the play during class time.

All page references refer to the Currency Press edition, 1994.

#### **Reading a play for understanding**

- Read the text for story. Be clear about what is happening in the play: What is the action? What are the events? What happens?
- Read the text to find out about the characters. Find obvious, basic information: age, size, temperament, relationships. Avoid making value judgments — for example, a good person.
- Read the text to discover where the action (each action) takes place. Fill out in your imagination what the surroundings look, feel and smell like.
- Read the play for period (historical location), if applicable, and see what else you can find out about:
  - the history and social life of the period
  - the art, architecture and fashion of that period
  - the popular music from that time
  - the biographies of significant people from that time.
- Read the play for geographical background (the country, urban or rural, season, climate, weather, and physical surroundings).
- Read the text for political background. Does the play suggest a strong political background? If so, how does it affect the characters in relation to — authority, power, security and influence?
- Read the text for social background (class, social standing). What social groups does the play represent and what are the values and lifestyle of those groups?

(Adapted from QSA Module "Spotlight on Script" published 2002)

### **Act I scene i**

1. We are immediately aware of the setting.
  - How is it described?
  - What is the immediate impact on the audience?
  - What comment do you think Nowra is making on society's treatment of mental illness by setting the play in such a depressing place?
2. What are Lucy and Nick's attitudes to what Lewis is doing at the asylum theatre? How do their comments and actions reveal this?
3. What is Lewis' initial justification for producing the play? Why do you think he makes this explicit?
4. Take close note of how Justin, the social worker, describes the patients to Lewis, the advice he gives and Lewis' reaction (pp4-7).
  - List the quotes that refer to the patients.
  - In your own words describe Justin's view of the patients?
  - At this early stage, what are Lewis' feelings towards them?
5. "Love is not so important nowadays." (p10) Explain what Lewis means here. Note the irony in Roy's reaction to this.
6. Nowra successfully provides a clear image of the setting and atmosphere in this opening scene. What is the atmosphere that is created? How has this been achieved? Note, particularly how Lewis fits in and the control, or lack of, that he shows. We have been introduced to all of the characters.

*Task: In tabular form briefly note your first impressions of each character. Are they immediately likeable? Leave space (about 1/2 page for each character) to add your observations as you progress through the play.*

### **Act I scene ii**

1. After the many problems of putting on an opera are confronted and the patients go out for lunch, Lewis says to himself, "Why can't I ever say no? Just leave. They're mad. It's madness...". What does this show us about his character? (note the stage direction)
2. Lewis' reactions to Nick on the radio show us what about him? What differences between these two are already evident. How do we as the audience come to this understanding?
3. Doug says, "Women like to pretend they don't play around but they're just more secretive about it." (p18) What does this imply about Doug's attitude to women? Do you think Lewis would agree with him? Do you agree with it?

4. Doug goes on to warn Lewis about marriage using a adage passed on by his father, “You can always find loneliness in a marriage, but never solitude.” What does this mean? What light does it throw on Doug’s character and how we view him?

5. Read Doug’s story (p19-20). How does this affect Lewis’ and our own perception of the patients and their conditions?

6. What is the effect of Cherry’s duck shooting story straight (p21) after Doug’s? Does Lewis initially believe the story? What does this tell us about the general population’s understanding of people with a mental illness?

*Task: Add to your character sheets any further information you gained from this scene. Include important quotes where appropriate.*

### **Act I scene iii**

1. What impression of Justin is created through his involvement in this scene?

- “The experiment is over” (p22)
- “Now the position of a social worker in an asylum can be precarious. This does not look good for me or for you, does it?” (p23)
- “Sorry is such an easy word to say.” (p23)
- “Straight out of university...” (p24)

What are your feelings towards him? Note how Nowra has achieved this?

2. When Cherry announces, “It was me! It was me!” (p23), she takes the blame for the fire from Doug. Why does she do this? What implications does this episode have for the success of the endeavour?

3. Lewis joins the conspiracy by confirming Cherry’s story. How is this significant? How has Nowra positioned the audience here? What would they feel about this episode?

4. The patients create many problems for Lewis in this scene, problems that add to our perception of mental illness. As soon as he overcomes the conflict with Zac, another one, created by Ruth this time, develops. Ruth clearly has problems distinguishing between reality and illusion. How is this theme developed in this scene? What do these conflicts add to the audience’s picture of mental illness?

5. Cherry comments to Julie that Roy is performing a “Do it yourself lobotomy” (p27) Explain the significance of this comment? Consider how differently the patients and the audience might have received this if it had been spoken by Nick, for example?

6. Lewis recounts his experience with his ‘mad’ grandmother. How might his experience have influenced his decision to take this job?

*Task: What does the conversation between Lewis and Julie, and then Cherry, reveal about their views on love? Which views do you agree with? Explain in a short paragraph.*

### **Act I scene iv**

1. Comment on how Julie describes her addiction. She distinguishes what drugs mean to the different characters. How does she differ from Doug and Zac?
2. How does Nick display a lack of insensitivity towards to patients? What does this imply about his character?
3. Henry's outburst is rather a shock. Why? Why does he call Nick and Lewis "traitors"?

*Task: Compare Nick and Lewis's response to Henry's outburst. What does this illustrate about their characters? Support with reference from the text.*

### **Act II scene i**

1. How has Henry changed and how is this made evident to the audience?
2. The use of a mesmer magnet is said by Lewis to be a satire on Mesmer and his supposed cures – the magnet was used on pretend poisoning, successfully. Cherry brings in equipment for shock treatment to use instead of this. How is this a satire on the medical procedure?

Consider this part of the scene from the audience's perspective. What would the dramatic impact of this be? How would the audience feel about the procedure? What point is Nowra making?

3. A philosophical discussion of love follows (on pages 60-61). Outline the individual perceptions of Lewis, Roy, Julie and Henry? How does Julie's view change? What motivates this change?
4. What does Henry's revelation on pp 64-5 further reveal about him? How does it relate to his outburst in Act I scene iv about the play "condoning the corruption of innocence"?

*Task: The theatre is plunged into darkness (p65). Consider what each of the following characters are thinking and feeling as the darkness surrounds them; Zac, Ruth, Lewis, Cherry, Julie. Choose one of the characters and write a short inner monologue that is occurring in the character's head and not voiced to the audience.*

### **Act II scene ii**

1. Lucy's arrival forces Lewis finally to decide between continuing the play with the patients and helping out Nick and Lucy with his play and the moratorium. Explain why Lewis makes the decision he does. On a deeper level the decision is about much more. What does this decision represent?

*Task: What follows this is Lewis' discovery that Lucy and Nick are sleeping together. Their interaction here illustrates the divergent standards held by Lewis and Lucy. Quote several extracts of dialogue from each character to illustrate this difference.*

### **Act II scene iii**

Consider the use of different music in the play. How does Zac's choice of music add to the general concerns raised by *Cosi Fan Tutte*?

"It's never happened to me before." (p75) How much experience has Roy really had?

*Task: Nick's arrival provides Lewis with the opportunity to finally consolidate his self-journey. How does Nick attempt to excuse his behaviour with Lucy? List some quotes that show this. What does this scene add to the issue of love and fidelity, especially in terms of mateship and the separation of sex and love?*

### **Act II scene iv**

This scene shows the final performance of *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Consider how the words of the opera contribute to the ideas developed in the play as a whole.

Look closely at the last speech beginning "Happy is the man..." (p84). Explain why this is ironic.

### **Act II scene v**

1. The performance has finished. Has there been any discernible change in the relationships the characters have with one another? Give examples that relate to different scenes in the play.
2. Cherry is still trying to feed Lewis. How does Julie provoke her? What is Cherry's response? How does Lewis defuse the conflict? What does this tell us about the changes in Lewis and his sensitivity to the idiosyncrasies of individual characters?
3. In the opening scene Lewis explains that he is directing the play because he needs the money. In this final scene he is given his pay packet. Is this still the motivating force that it was for him in the opening scene? Explain.

*Task: What is the role of Lewis' monologue at the close of the scene? What purpose does it serve? What does it tell us about the lives of the characters? How does this extra information add to our understanding of each character?*

## ORIENTATING ACTIVITIES - post-reading tasks

After reading the play as a whole or skim reading selected scenes, students could individually complete one or both of the following tasks to consolidate their understanding of the changing nature of the characters in COSI.

### *Representation*

Design and create a representation of Lewis and his changing views. Your representation can take any form but it should include text as well as visual material.

### *Writing folio*

Choose TWO of the following characters and write TWO diary entries as each character. Characters: Lewis, Henry, Justin, Nick, Lucy.

The first entry should express the views of the character at, or near, the beginning of COSI and the second should reflect their views and opinions at the end of the play. You should aim to express the thoughts and feelings of the chosen characters and show the change in perception that has resulted.

## Louis Nowra's reading of COSI - live and mediated

“Everyone goes mad in their own particular way. The actors performing COSI have to go mad in their own individual way”, said Nowra. Nowra thinks madness is too generalised, and it is based on each individuals past and experiences. At the end, Lewis is no longer afraid of madness. Lewis is thoroughly transformed by the patients. Nowra uses a mixture of laughter and madness, which is a volatile mixture. “We usually see madness as dark and scary, so we can keep it in a corner and ignore it”. When Nowra adds humour to it, then we begin to be able to relate to it, they share similar emotions.

Nowra says: “Lewis has to face various hurdles throughout the play. He suffers from a lack of gumption at first. His major hurdle is Henry. Lewis realises that he has got to get Henry to stay. Through rehearsing he is falling in love with the patients. Every scene is a hurdle. Each time he learns to love the patients as individuals. He goes on what is called a character arc. It is a ‘fish out of water story’. Lewis is thrust into another world to transform him. Often, when someone doesn’t have a family or friends due to a dysfunctional past (in Lewis’ case his relationship with Nick and Lucy is going downhill) he then makes the patients his family, he finds a new sense of reality with them”.

Vietnam War is what Lewis believes in at first. But he will agree with anyone at the start, so long as it keeps the peace. When Lewis enters the asylum it is like an island (thrust into another world). The patients don’t even know there is a war going on. Lewis is transformed by his experience. How it works is that you stick people on this island, and watch how they change. They are forced to face their demons because they can’t get off the island.

### **Why the change elements of the play in the movie?**

In the play, inside the asylum, there is more intensity. As soon as Lewis left the asylum all the energy dissipated. He needs to be kept on the island to emphasise change. So why does it work in the movie? Nowra believes that: “in the movie you can maintain the energy through montage, close ups etc. also, movies have to be more extreme, so Lewis being admitted makes his transformation more extreme. He is now one of the mental patients. It emphasises the journey more strongly, it is not so defined in the play. Nick has the gift of the gab, and is a better director. Lewis may not be as good, but he manages to bring the patients out of their world, because he loves them. They forget the institution, and see they can be someone else. They forget their own beliefs and systems. In theatre, the way a play is acted can change due to audience. In a movie, it remains the same”.

Nowra dislikes political correctness. He says” “Nick and Lucy believe they are right. Lewis believes (in end) that love is the greatest thing you can experience. Political ideologies are always changing, but love is constant. The play has more subtle hurdles. It is character driven. A movie is action driven. Events change them. Why doesn't Henry speak much the first few scenes, but he is still on stage, as a main part would be? His silence intrigues you. In a film, action determines character. In a play, character determines action. In the film Lewis is still put through hoops. He is aged 20-21 Why? When others are older? It is an age when events, people etc will alter your perspective on the world. Changing your perspective of the world means you yourself are changing”.

Love is trivial but marvellous. Same goes for Lewis jealousy, which he also must go through. Why isn't Lewis upset about infidelity? Nowra responds by saying: “Lewis realises she doesn't mean much to him anymore. In the movie, the Americans wanted Lucy and Lewis to stay together”. Nowra's point is that they don't. “Because of his transformation, Lewis can't go back, as that would be going backwards. It undermines the idea of the play. In the play, he is not going back to his old world. Lucy and Nick are not transformed, they remain the same. Lewis moves on. The Americans also hated that Ben kissed Toni Collette (Julie). In the American version, they have him apologise the next day for kissing her. Once again undermines the point. By kissing her he enters their world. He gives them another world of love, fidelity and beauty for one night only”.

According to Nowra the main turning point is the Ruth confrontation. “All this was fine, but too subtle, when rehearsing, Mendelson thought they needed a major defining moment, a yes-no moment”. So Nowra wrote next bit last minute. “Hence, the Henry moment. Lewis has to fight to keep Henry, as he is now in their world. He now believes in something. It may be trivial, but Henry causes Lewis to listen to his political viewpoint and understand it, even if he doesn't necessarily agree. Nick couldn't do that, he couldn't make himself look and understand someone else's view”. Nowra said the story is set over a period of about 4 weeks.

(Edited interview of Louis Nowra taken from *Film Written – Essays and Commentary*  
<http://filmwritten.org>. The author of the text is unknown.)

## ENHANCING ACTIVITIES

### Going to the theatre

#### It's not like going to the movies or watching TV...

Many students' performing arts experiences are limited to viewing television and film. Generally, young people have few entertainment experiences in which they are expected to remain quiet and closely attentive; many experiences with live entertainment invite active participation. It is important, therefore, to provide students with information about their role as audience members – the final collaborators in live performance.

In theatre performances, audiences and performers agree to “suspend belief” to pretend together that the action is real and is happening for the first time. This agreement often relies on the acceptance of performance conventions (practices accepted as part of playmaking in various forms and styles of performance).

Performance conventions found in COSI include:

- ☞ Doubling: when performers play more than one role in the performance.
- ☞ Settings: suggested by use of simple props and furniture.
- ☞ Suspension of belief: the audience has to ‘play’ with the idea that the performers are creating a play within a play.
- ☞ Direct address: characters address the audience, like a form of oral diary and, a revealing of inner thoughts or inner monologue. This can move the action forward and/or set a mood for the following action.
- ☞ Narrator: the character of Lewis acts as the play's narrator, he is the character through which the audience views other characters and situations. Lewis is the audiences' lens or viewfinder.

### COSI in the theatre – proscenium arch staging

The Optus Playhouse theatre at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre is described as a **Proscenium Arch**. But what exactly does this mean?

1. *What is a proscenium arch?*

The arch (or "picture frame") which separates the acting area (stage) from the audience area (house or auditorium).

2. *What was the name of the first proscenium theatre? Where was it built? When?*

The 3000 seat Teatro Farnese, the first permanent proscenium theatre, was built into the Great Hall of the *Palazzo della Pilotta* in Parma, Italy in 1618.

3. *What is the actor-audience relationship within a proscenium theatre?*

In a proscenium theatre the actor is on a raised platform in front of the audience.

## **Definitions and terms**

Proscenium theatres, also known as picture frame stages were developed during the Italian Renaissance. The audience experiences the theatrical event by looking through the "picture frame" of the proscenium arch. All audience members are seated on one side of the arch, like in a movie theatre, and all actors and scenic spectacle are framed within the arch or just in front of it. The proscenium theatre's primary advantage is that it hides or "masks" the actors and scenery used for other scenes and the machinery needed for scenic spectacles. Areas above, below, and to the sides of the stage are hidden from the audience's view by the frame of the proscenium.

The area of the stage floor in front of the proscenium is called the apron. Descriptions of regions of the stage are given from the perspective of an actor facing the audience: thus stage right means in the direction of the actor's right, but the audience's left. Upstage and downstage are terms that date from the Renaissance, when the stage floor was built on a "rake", or slope, to aid audience sight-lines and the illusion of perspective painted on the scenery. The back of the stage was higher than the front in these old theatres, and we still refer to stage areas farther from the audience as "upstage".

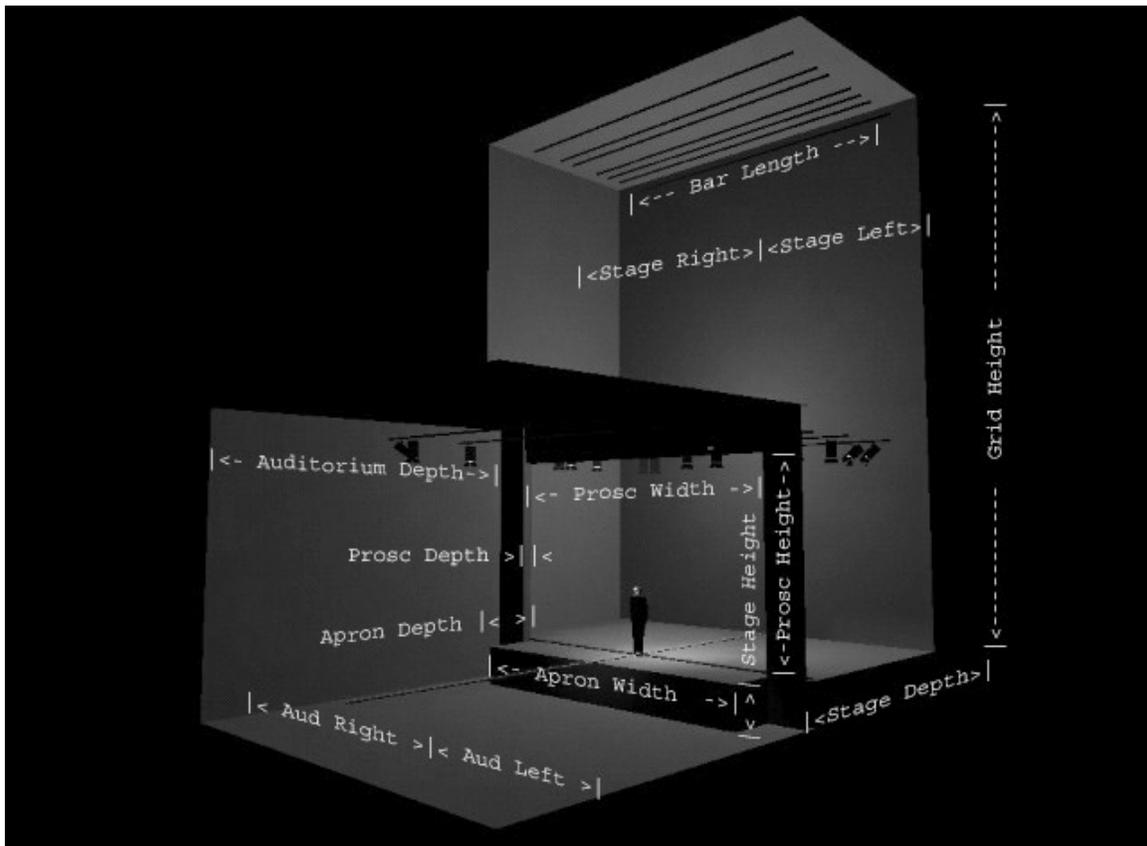
Most theatres have "traps", or areas of the stage floor which can be removed for lowering and raising actors and scenery through the stage floor. In some theatres, the apron lowers to form an orchestra pit used in musical comedies. To each side of the stage, hidden from the audience by the proscenium, are the "wings", where scenery is stored, lights are placed, and actors await entrances. Above the stage is usually a "fly loft", where more lights are placed and where scenery, such as painted backdrops, can be suspended and then lowered to the stage floor or raised out of the sight of the audience.

Some of the basic scenic and lighting elements placed above in the fly loft, off-stage in the wings, or in the stage traps are flats, drops, platforms, wagons, trees, and battens. "Flats" are usually made of canvas stretched over a wooden frame, and are painted to look like interior or exterior walls, trees, or other relatively flat objects. "Drops" are large pieces of fabric suspended from pipes and usually painted to resemble a landscape, building interior, or other location. A "scrim" and a "cyclorama" are each similar to drops in that they are large, suspended pieces of fabric, but each has a special property. A scrim is made of loosely woven fabric, which, when lit from the front appears opaque but when lit from the back appears translucent or transparent. A cyclorama is used in conjunction with lighting instruments; since it is white, any colour light can be projected onto it to change the colour and pattern of the scenic background. "Platforms" are usually constructed of wood and placed at various heights; they may represent the second floor of a house, a higher deck of a ship, or simply a different place from the scene on the stage floor but that the audience needs to see simultaneously. A "wagon" is simply a platform on wheels or in a track that can then move on the stage. Lighting "instruments" are typically hung above the stage, over the audience in front of the stage, or in the wings from the sides of the stage. Horizontally placed "pipes" for lighting instruments are called "battens" and vertically placed pipes are called "trees".

A variety of curtains called "teasers" are commonly used to hide all of these structures from the audience's view. "Legs" are long black curtains in the wings that hide objects in the wings. "Borders" are hung from pipes in the fly loft to mask objects hung above. A combination of two legs, a border and the stage floor echo the shape of the proscenium arch. Theatres typically have three sets of teasers between the proscenium arch and the upstage wall. Actors and scenery can thus enter in any of four gaps on either side of the stage. These gaps are numbered from down to upstage; for example an actor entering the stage from "right one" would enter from stage right between the proscenium arch and first leg. The large curtain that is often down as the audience enters is called the "main drape"; in some theatres it is highly elaborate, with painted or woven images.

The audience's area of the theatre is called the "house" or auditorium. In this space, directions are given from the audience's perspective when facing the stage; thus house right means to a seated audience member's right. In the United States, the lowest area of audience seating is called the orchestra, and orchestra seats are normally the most expensive. Larger theatres usually also have at least one balcony, and many older theatres will have "boxes" along the sides the theatre on the balcony level(s).

(Adapted from Wilson and Goldfarb. (2001) *Theater: The Lively Art*, 4th edition. Chapter 4. Pages 77 – 95)



(Proscenium Arch Theatre image taken from *Open Stage (2001)* Multimedia package)

## SYNTHESISING ACTIVITIES

### Thinking, talking about, and responding to the performance

*Drama (theatre, film and television) has become immensely important in our times. We see more drama than ever before and are more directly influenced, conditioned, programmed by drama than ever before. Drama has become one of the principal vehicles of information, one of the prevailing methods of thinking about life and situations.*

*(Martin Esslin, The Field of Drama, 1987, p 13)*

When talking about the play, focus on Lewis. He is the only one to occupy every level of the play's perspective at some point. Everyone shifts between at least two levels (example, Cherry is also a doctor [hypnotist] and Despina).

Questions to ask about Lewis:

- ☞ Is it his perspective that changes/grows more than anyone else's? Look for his moments of change.
- ☞ Do changes make his life more meaningful? Can he now take control over his self? What about the others? Compare.
- ☞ Relate to the idea of change in perspective. His tone changes. His assumptions change, and also how he relates to them changes.

## SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT TASKS

### 1) Understanding characters and their messages

Characters in a work of fiction are created for specific purposes and it is worthwhile to question why they are presented as they are on stage. In COSI we witness a transformation of the main character, Lewis, as he journeys to a new realisation of himself and his values. His experiences with the patients and his interaction with all the characters clearly show by the end of the play that he is a changed man. The character of Lewis provides us with a unique opportunity to consider the idea of changing perspectives. We can, however, also consider how the minor characters could be viewed from different perspectives.

### 2) Writing about Lewis

Prepare a brief profile of Lewis at the beginning of the play. You can use information found throughout the text but concentrate on writing about him as he is before he appears on stage.

Look again at the opening pages of the play. What is Lewis' motivation for being there? How would you describe his initial reaction to the patients. Add these to your profile.

Compile a list of quotes that map Lewis as he changes throughout the play. You should also record any stage directions that reflect his personality. You might start with:

- “I need the money, Lucy” (p 1)
- “Do you think we should be doing something like this? ... In these days, you know, the Vietnam war?” (p 9)
- “I mean about the theme. Love is not so important these days.” (p 10)

Use your list of quotes to determine the change that Lewis goes through. How do his views on central issues change? Consider especially his views on love and fidelity, politics and mental illness. Write a paragraph on each issue.

Finally, consider how the audience relates to Lewis. Are we inclined to empathise with him or are we led to view him critically? What is it that makes us take this perspective?

### 3) Writing about the other characters

The values and experiences of the audience largely influence the way a character is perceived. Consider the following characters and how they would be viewed by yourself, Lewis, your parent or teacher and Henry.

- Nick
- Lucy
- Justin
- Julie
- Roy or Henry

What is it that affects the way a character is viewed? Is there a more correct view of any of these characters? Support your answer with textual reference.

### 4) Sample essay topics

*The following three topics maybe used for an extended writing exercise that could be used for individual assessment purposes in the responding phase of drama. Students will have to undertake research (see Resources to Assist Understanding on the next page) as well as drawn upon both the text and the performance to complete the written task. It is advisable that before undertaking the task, students are given a model for essay writing structure (see Student Worksheet 2 – The 5 Paragraph Essay).*

1. “The patients are merely foils to the character of Lewis – it is his transformation that is the focus of the drama.” Discuss this point of view with reference to scenes and lines from the play.
2. How is the character of Lewis central to COSI? Critically argue Lewis’ role in COSI and demonstrate your point with reference to either the play (or the film).
3. What was the nature of Australian society and its values in the 1970s? Using a character analysis format demonstrate your understanding of how the characters embody or react against the prevailing values of the 1970s.

## RESOURCES TO ASSIST UNDERSTANDING

### In Print

- Kelly, V. *The Theatre of Louis Nowra*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1998.  
Kempe A. & Warner, L. *Starting with Scripts*. Stanley Thornes, Cheltenham, 1997.  
MacRoberts, R. *A Study Guide To Louis Nowra's Cosi*. Ballarat: Wizard Books, 1997.  
Nowra, L. *Cosi*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1994.  
Nowra, L. *Cosi: the screenplay*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1996.  
Thomson, H. Reviews. *Australasian Drama Studies* October 1993 : pp.175-178  
Tourelle, L. & McNamara, M. 1998, *Performance: A Practical Approach to Drama*. Rigby Heinemann, Melbourne.

### Video

- Cosi* (video recording) Miramax Films, Sydney, 1995.  
*Louis Nowra* (video recording) Interviewed by Veronica Kelly  
36 minutes, AFI Sydney, 1987.  
(available from QUT Library, Kelvin Grove and Australian Film and Sound Archives)

### On the Web and Multimedia Packages

Theatres – The Open Stages  
<http://www.openstages.com/help/thatres.htm>

Contemporary Australian Playwrights  
<http://www.methuen.co.uk/contemporaryaustralianplays.html>

Australian National Playwright's Centre  
<http://anpc.org.au/>

Stage Left Archive  
<http://www.stageleft.com.au/archive.html>

Film Written – Essays and Commentary  
<http://filmwritten.org/>

La Boite Theatre  
<http://www.laboite.com.au/>

Queensland Performing Arts Centre  
<http://www.qpac.com.au/whatson/supportingmaterials>

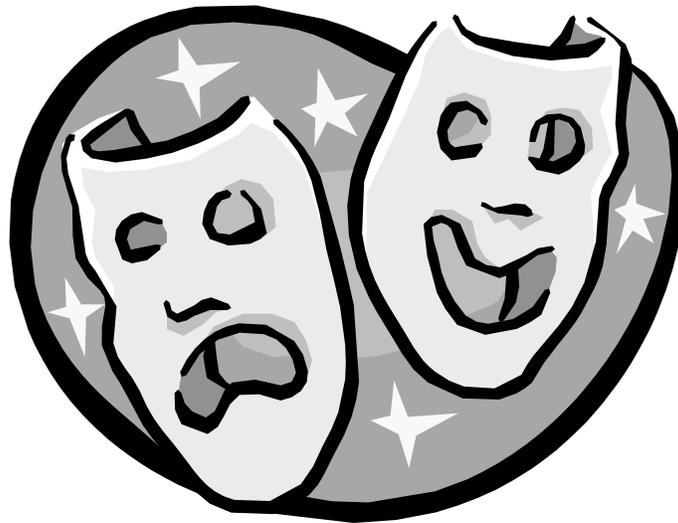
All the Internet address (URLs) given were correct at the time of research and printing. However, due to the dynamic nature of the Internet, some addresses may have changed, or sites may have ceased to exist. No responsibility for any such changes can be accepted by either the writer, La Boite Theatre or QPAC.

The following words should be understood and used in your discussion and written analysis.

audience	The spectators of an event or play. The location and expectations of an audience will impact on the staging of any performance.
blocking	The plan of the positions and moves of the actors. This is usually done early in the rehearsal period.
cast	The actors who will rehearse and play the roles of the characters in the play.
costume	The clothing worn by an actor to designate character.
design	The conceptualisation of the staging of the play. The overall design concept includes lighting, staging, sound, costume and make-up.
dialogue	Speech delivered by more than one speaker.
director	The person with the overall concept of the production. The director manages all rehearsals and oversees the work of the designers.
ensemble	A performing group that shows a strong sense of trust, belonging and working well together.
form	The structure of a play. The form often relates to traditional drama structures.
given circumstances	Background information, at any given moment, that helps with the interpretation of the text. It may include information about previous incidents or events, relationships between characters, motivation and so on.
interpretation	The meaning made of a given piece of text, based on the evidence found within that text.
lighting	The way lights are used and modified by changing focus, colour or intensity to draw attention to aspects of a production.
monologue	A lengthy speech by a single speaker, which may reveal thoughts, feelings and motivation.
motivation	The driving force behind the words and actions of a character.
play review	An evaluation of a performance of a play. Play reviews are usually written.
plot	The story or sequence of action of a play.
props	Moveable objects used by characters as part of the dramatic action.

scenes	The sections into which a play is divided by the playwright.
set	Stage/acting area complete with furniture, decorations, props and scenery.
setting	The location of the action of the play.
stage directions	Information in the written play text that gives advice to the actors and director about the setting, characters' actions or movement, or how lines are to be delivered.
stage manager	The individual who manages and supervises all backstage action. The stage manager 'calls' the show by cuing the lighting and sound operators and the changes of set, props or curtains.
style	The way or manner in which a play is written or performed.
sub-text	The underlying idea behind what is said.
technician	The person who operates the machinery, lighting, sound equipment or computers used to enhance a production.

(Adapted from QSA Module "Spotlight on Script" published 2002)



**THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY****Analyze the assignment and determine what is required.**

With a highlighter, note important words that define the topic.

Then organize your plan

**Outline your five paragraph essay and include these elements:***Introductory Paragraph*

The opening paragraph sets the tone.

It not only introduces the topic, but outlines where you are going with it (the thesis). If you do a good job in the opening, your will draw your reader into your "experience."

**General Topic Sentence**

1. Subtopic One
2. Subtopic Two
3. Subtopic Three

(Transition or linking statement/sentence)

*Supporting Paragraphs*

- Write a transition to establish the sub-topic. Each paragraph has to flow, one to the next.
- Write the topic sentence. The transition can be included in the topic sentence.
- Supporting ideas, examples, details must be specific to the sub-topic. The tendency in supporting paragraphs is to put in just about anything.

*2. First Supporting Paragraph*

Restate Subtopic One

Supporting Details or Examples

Transition

*3. Second Supporting Paragraph*

Restate Subtopic Two

Supporting Details or Examples

Transition

*4. Third Supporting Paragraph*

Restate Subtopic Three

Supporting Details or Examples

Transition

### *Closing or Summary Paragraph*

This is a difficult paragraph to write effectively. You cannot assume that the reader sees your point.

- Restate the introductory thesis/paragraph with originality. Do not simply copy the first paragraph.
- Summarize your argument with some degree of authority. This paragraph should leave your reader with no doubt as to your position or conclusion of logic.
- Be powerful as this is the last thought that you are leaving with the reader.

### **Hints for Effective Writing**



- **Write in the active voice**

It is much more powerful. Do that for each sentence in the introductory paragraph. Unless you are writing a personal narrative, do not use the pronoun "I."

- **Varying sentence structure**

Review to avoid the same dull pattern of always starting with the subject of the sentence.

- **Brainstorm to find the best supporting ideas**

The best supporting ideas are the ones about which you have some knowledge. If you do not know about them, you cannot do a good job writing about them. Don't weaken the essay with ineffective argument.

- **Practice writing introductory paragraphs on various topics**

Even if you do not use them, they can be compared with the type of writing you are doing now. It is rewarding to see a pattern of progress.

- **Check your spelling and grammar**

Subjects and verbs should agree, and verb tenses be consistent.

- **Examine your whole essay for logic**

Do thoughts build and flow? Avoid gaps in logic, or too much detail.

- **Use transitional words and phrases**

Avoid sentences beginning with pronouns and constructions such as "There are....,"