

## 4 Making time for critical reflection



Chancellor Blank with students at the Career Exploration Center (UW-Madison, 2017)

### *“Know thyself.”*

It’s an aphorism you’ve probably heard more than once — not surprising, since scholars date it from the time of ancient Greece and Egypt (appearing as it does in numerous Socratic dialogues written by Plato). But as we saw in chapter 3 on career concepts and theories, knowing yourself — especially knowing your possible place in the modern global economy — is not necessarily easy. Yet employers know that such insight is essential: In one Northwestern University study, 500 employers who were surveyed about job applicant behaviors reported that one of the top weaknesses of applicants was “not knowing themselves” (Schilling 2014).

As we described in chapter 1, such an understanding is the first step to building a **career narrative**: a cohesive story of how your previous accomplishments and your future goals work together to illuminate your most productive current career options. In this chapter we’ll explore several

different techniques for **critical reflection** — taking time out for intentional, structured, careful thought about where you’ve been and where you’re going, both in your academic and professional pursuits — that students have found useful in narrowing down different career paths (or even paths through their liberal education).

## Using critical reflection to build identity capital

The idea of critical reflection as a valuable part of an active, goal-directed education dates back to the early part of the twentieth century, when philosopher and psychologist John Dewey spoke of what he called “reflexive practice” as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (Stingu 2012; Hickson 2011). Decades later, in the 1980s, scholar Donald Schön popularized the notion of critical reflection

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**critical reflection**

Taking time out for structured, careful thought about where you've been and where you're going, both in your academic and professional pursuits.  
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as a way to uncover and analyze the tacit and often unacknowledged skills that artists and counselors bring to their work — knowledge that is not easily codified as “technical rationality” but which is nevertheless crucial to doing their jobs (Schön 1983; Thompson et al 2008). Educator Jack Mezirow brought the concept full circle back to Dewey by arguing that critical reflection led to the kind of open-minded self-awareness necessary for truly

transformative learning: “recognizing that we are not infallible, that we will make mistakes from time to time,” and thus can benefit from a bit of humility and empathy for others (Thompson et al 2008, p. 158).

While critical reflection may take many forms — “through a discussion with [a] supervisor or peer, by writing in a journal, or by expressing [...] thoughts and feelings creatively through poetry, song, story, painting or dance” — the point is always to combine an understanding of your own experiences with an understanding of the context around you (Hickson 2011). The hardest part about critical reflection is that, by definition, one must try to “surface” things which are normally hidden because we make assumptions about them or don’t think about them as important (Thompson et al 2008). Reflection without that kind of critical thinking is merely descriptive, not analytic. In other words, critical reflection asks us to do something very “meta”: to think about our thinking (we identified this as **metacognition** in chapter 2).

Critical reflection takes time and effort — but investing that time and effort in yourself pays dividends. In fact, social scientists use a metaphor from economics to describe how people can accumulate a resource called **identity capital** over the course of their lives as they practice critical reflection and build their career narrative (Warin 2015). Sociologist James Côté (2005)

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**identity capital**

Personal skills, attributes and attitudes that people can learn and develop over time through critical reflection and practice in order to better plan and achieve their career goals.  
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defined identity capital as “attributes associated with sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive in nature, that appear to be necessary for people to intelligently strategize and make decisions affecting their life courses,” especially under changing global economic conditions — things like “self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life,” for example. Others have extended this idea of identity capital as a key resource in building a career, blending

in with the older notion of “human capital” (job-related education and skills) that we discussed in chapter 2. As author Meg Jay puts it, “Identity capital is our collection of personal assets. It is the repertoire of individual resources that we assemble over time. These are the investments we make in ourselves, the things we do well enough, or long enough, that they become a part of who we are. Some identity capital goes on a resume, such as degrees, jobs, test scores, and clubs. Other identity capital is more personal, such as how we speak, where we are from, how we solve problems, how we look.” But in any case, “identity capital is what we bring to the adult marketplace. It is the currency we use to metaphorically purchase jobs and relationships and other things we want.” (Jay 2012, 6-7)

According to one liberal arts college career adviser, using critical reflection to begin building identity capital is the crucial first step in any career search: “Making the transition from academics to the work world does not begin with writing a résumé, buying a new suit, or getting that first job interview. It begins with thought, research, and goal setting” (Ballard 2002, p. 185). For example, here are three questions that students are asked to reflect on as their first assignment in the SuccessWorks INTER-LS 210 course:

1. How will your current path at UW will connect to your future career?
  2. What you think will be the most challenging aspect of your career search?
  3. What do you hope to get out of this course?

The rest of this chapter will introduce some tools for this kind of academic- and career-oriented critical reflection.

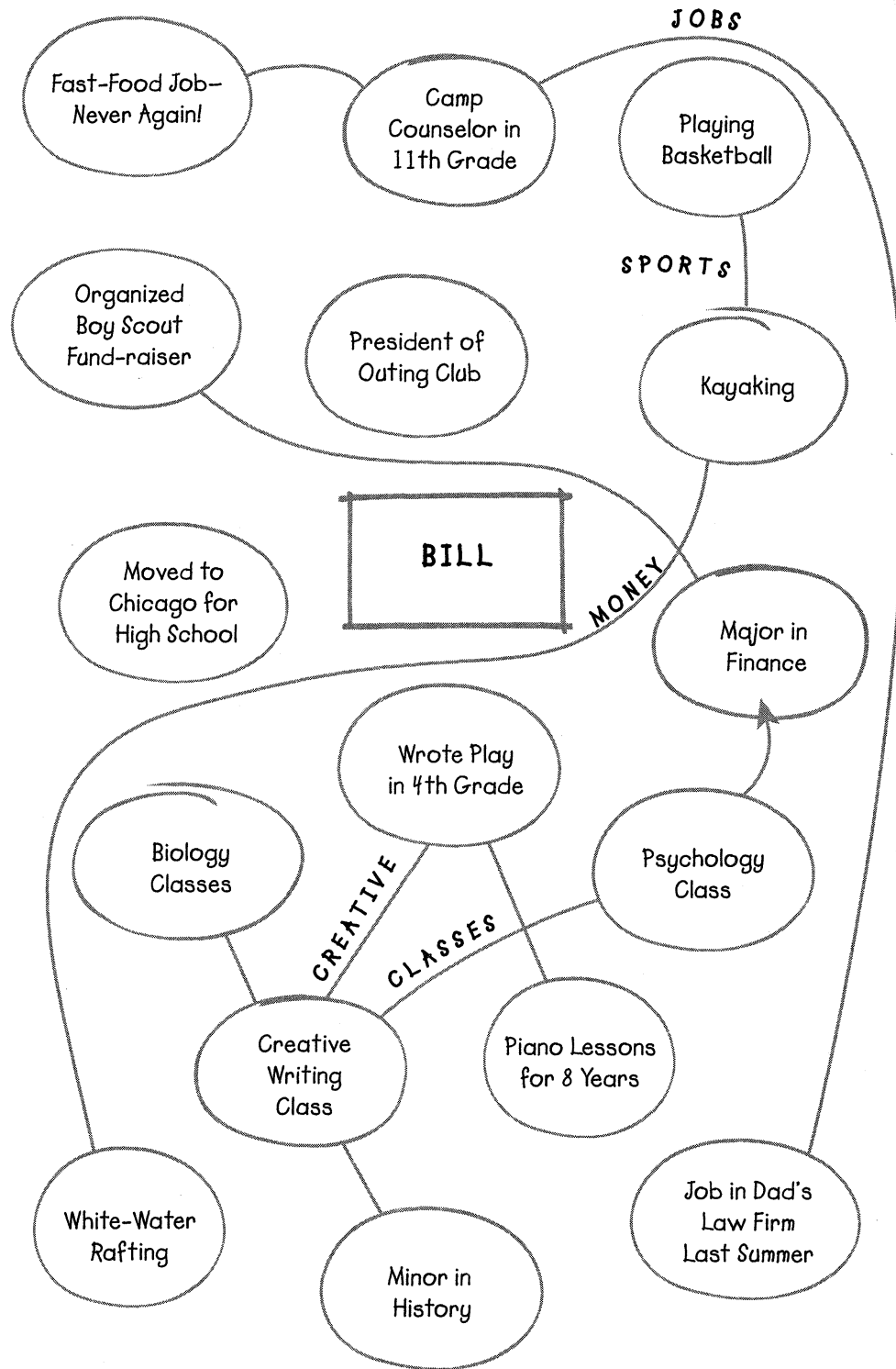
## Visual concept mapping

You've had a great deal of experiences already that will no doubt feed into your career choices throughout your lifetime. But bringing order to these experiences — and writing a compelling story about them — can be difficult. Career counselor and education scholar Katharine Brooks (2009) has developed an effective visual and cognitive exercise to help students bring narrative coherence to the “wanderings” they have experienced throughout their lives. Using a plain 8.5 x 11-inch piece of paper, Brooks instructs students to make a simple diagram of “all the interesting and significant things you've done or have happened to you”:

If a significant event occurred at age five, include it. Have you had unique jobs or taken unusual classes? Did you have a memorable summer experience? What are you most proud of in your life? Do you have hobbies you've pursued for a while? What awards or honors have you received during your life? Can you think of a particularly valuable lesson you've learned? What knowledge do you rely on that you have developed from your experiences or education? What successful experiences can you recall?

After making this basic diagram, Brooks asks students to start connecting the items with lines representing useful categories, like jobs, classes, sports, accomplishments, places, whatever.

Sample wanderings diagram



Brooks (2009)

After simply chunking into “categories” she asks students to move to reflecting on “themes”:

Do you see a thread that follows you from elementary school through college? Is there a pattern to the types of jobs you've held? What might some of your seemingly disparate experiences have in common?

Finally, Brooks suggests showing the resulting wanderings map to a friend, classmate, parent, counselor, professor, or other trusted adviser in order to get some outside feedback. This is a great opportunity to talk through your wandering map and see if you can start to tell the story of where your “career” has been so far — and where it’s going.

## Personal profile quizzes

A second reflective tool is a sort of individual “audit” through a short online questionnaire. (You’ve probably done a number of these in middle school and high school.) As we saw in chapter 3 on career concepts and theories, these kinds of instruments date back more than a century to the beginnings of vocational psychology; however, these days we don’t assume that any single objective test can possibly give you the single, definitive “correct” answer to what kind of career you should pursue. Rather, such instruments should be used to inspire your ongoing critical reflections about your strengths, interests, and goals as you move through your college major and your career.

Here are some examples of the different types of personal profile quizzes that you might encounter (some of which are available through SuccessWorks):

- **Personality-based quizzes.** For more than a century, the idea that one’s core personality should match one’s choice of lifetime career has held a powerful attraction, both for job-seekers hoping to find work that they would both enjoy and excel at, and for employers hoping to find workers who would be both content and productive in their roles. Much of this research hinges on an assumption that any given individual can be classified into one of a small number of universal personality types — and that such a personality will remain both consistent across diverse social situations and persistent over one’s adult lifetime. Two of the most popular tools developed to try to relate personality to occupation are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Big Five personality theory.

The **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator**, loosely based on theories by psychologist Carl Jung published in 1921, posits four different dimensions of human personality: “how we interact with the world and where we direct our energy; the kind of information we naturally notice; how we make decisions; and whether we prefer to live in a more structured way (making decisions) or in a more spontaneous way (taking in information)” (Tieger et

al 2014). Developed in the 1940s by Isabel Myers (and inspired by ideas from her mother Katharine Briggs), it first began to reach a wide audience of college guidance counselors when the Educational Testing Service purchased it in 1962 as a research tool. By the early 1970s, the test had caught the attention of a University of Florida psychologist who teamed up with Myers to launch a research and consulting firm based on the indicator. Today the instrument still exists largely outside of mainstream psychology, promoted through a nonprofit foundation run by one of Myers's children. However, the MBTI remains influential in corporate employment testing, according to one journalist who has studied its history: "The prominent consulting firm McKinsey & Company, for example, has made the test an integral part of its operations; McKinsey 'associates' often know their colleagues' four-letter MBTI types by heart" (Paul 2006, p. 118-121).

Here's a quick description of each dimension in the Myers-Briggs schema (Tieger et al 2014):

- **Extraversion / Introversion (E/I):** Each of us has a natural preference for either the outer or inner world, although by necessity we all function in both. Functioning in our preferred world energizes us; functioning in the opposite world is more difficult and can be tiring. We call those who prefer the outer world Extraverts and those who prefer the inner world Introverts.
- **Sensing / Intuition (S/N):** People who prefer Sensing [...] concentrate on what can be seen, heard, felt, smelled, or tasted. They trust whatever can be measured or documented and focus on what is real and concrete. [...] Some people are more interested in meanings, relationships, and possibilities based on facts than in the facts themselves. You could say these people trust their 'sixth sense' (Intuition) more than their other five.
- **Thinking / Feeling (T/F):** Thinkers prefer decisions that make sense logically. They pride themselves on their ability to be objective and analytical in the decision-making process. [...] Feelers make decisions based on how much they care or what they feel is right. They pride themselves on their ability to be empathetic and compassionate.
- **Judging / Perceiving (J/P):** People with a preference for Judging [...] tend to live in an orderly way and are happiest when their lives are structured and matters are settled. [...] Judges seek to regulate and control life. People with a preference for Perceiving [...] like to live in a spontaneous way and are happiest when their lives are flexible. [...] Perceivers seek to understand life rather than control it.

When using the MBTI, a person determines which preference they hold for each dimension, which results in classifying each person in one of sixteen possible categories of personality type:

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*Sixteen possible MBTI personality categories*

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
ISTP	ISFP	INFP	INTP
ESTP	ESFP	ENFP	ENTP
ESTJ	ESFJ	ENFJ	ENTJ

Tieger et al. (2014)

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You can probably already see from these brief descriptions how your MBTI category might be linked to various career preferences and strengths. For example, the official Myers & Briggs Foundation (<http://www.myersbriggs.org>) suggests, “A person with a preference for Introversion may find he or she is happier doing research, while a person who prefers Extraversion may favor a field with more interaction with people.”

While the Myers-Briggs scheme is perhaps the most popularly-known personality categorization tool out there, it remains outside of the mainstream of both psychology and business administration research. In these areas, a different theory of personality categorization has recently gained interest: the concept of a universal **Big Five** set of personality traits. Like the MBTI, the idea of the Big Five is that individuals can be quickly sorted into various personality categories through a relatively brief quiz, and that these categories will remain relatively stable across a lifetime of personal development through different social situations and roles. However, the origins of the Big Five lie not in Jungian psychoanalytic theory, but in a lexical (dictionary and vocabulary) analysis of the various terms and concepts that different cultures have used to describe personalities throughout history. As one journalist describes the idea, “if an important aspect of personality exists, people will have invented a word for it. The more significant a quality is, the more synonyms our language will offer to describe it. If a characteristic is less vital, words referring to it will



be fewer, will be used less often, and may even drop out of the vernacular altogether” (Paul 2016).

This idea, which dates to the 1880s, has waxed and waned in popularity as the field of psychology has developed over the past century and a half. In the 1930s, one psychologist identified about 4,500 English-language words describing personality; in the 1940s, another psychologist classified those words into sixteen distinct personality factors and began to build measurement instruments (self-quizzes) for them. But by the 1980s, University of Oregon psychologist Lewis Goldberg narrowed this number even further, noting that the same five factors seemed to keep cropping up in research studies again and again: “There was Extroversion, the inclination to actively reach out to others. Neuroticism, the disposition to feel negative emotions. Agreeableness, the tendency to be good-natured and cooperative. Conscientiousness, the propensity to be organized and goal oriented. And Openness, the proclivity to be imaginative and curious.” The most well-known instrument to test for Big Five traits, called the “NEO PI-R,” was designed by psychologists Paul Costa Jr. and Robert McCrae and “appears to be the test of choice for psychologists conducting personality-related research” (Paul 2016).

To try one of these personality assessments yourself, consult the expert career advisers at the **Career Exploration Center** or **L&S SuccessWorks**, since knowing how to interpret the results of these instruments is important. (If you simply want to get a flavor of these tests, you might try the free web sites <http://www.outofservice.com/bigfive/> for a Big Five personality test example, or <http://www.16personalities.com/> which is largely based on the MBTI.)

- **Character-based quizzes.** One of the problems with personality tests — and the theories behind them — is the question of how much agency this allows people to choose careers in which they might succeed. Other “matching” schemes attempt to determine not what kinds of innate personality someone might possess, but what kinds of chosen values a person might hold. The **Values in Action Inventory** (VIA) claims to help students identify “five signature character strengths valued across cultures as elements of a well-lived life” through a free online test (Schreiner 2013). The idea that “a fulfilling life results from identifying one’s signature strengths of character and using them as much as possible on a regular basis” comes from University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman, popularized in his 2002 book *Authentic Happiness*. In a recent article, Seligman and his colleagues describe the difference between their VIA character-based instrument and the MBTI personality-based instrument: “Introversion and extraversion, for example, are traits with no obvious moral weight. Kindness and teamwork in contrast are morally valued, which is why they are considered character strengths” (Peterson et al 2010).

Like the lexical origins of the Big Five personality traits, the VIA test was based, in part, on a reading of historically influential religious and philosophical texts across the globe — “the books of *Exodus* and *Proverbs* in the case of Judaism, the *Analects* in the case of Confucianism, and so on” — to find character strengths that were not only repeatedly valued across different cultures, but also measurable in some empirical way by positive psychology researchers (Peterson et al 2010). Their results are broken into six categories:

(1) wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); (2) courage (bravery, honesty, perseverance, zest); (3) humanity {kindness, love, social intelligence); (4) justice (fairness, leadership, teamwork); (5) temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and (6) transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality).

After developing this list, the team used an online survey to sample over 7,000 currently employed adult respondents. Their main finding was that “across occupations, character strengths of curiosity, zest, hope, gratitude, and spirituality were associated with work satisfaction” (Peterson et al 2010). To take this assessment yourself and learn more about it, consult **L&S SuccessWorks** or try the free web site <http://www.viacharacter.org>

- **Strengths-based quizzes.** As discussed in chapter 3, the Clifton StrengthsFinder tool is a product of the Gallup corporation (developed through decades of management consulting work) and is based on the principles of positive psychology. The INTER-LS 210 and INTER-LS 215 courses use a required textbook that both gives access to the online StrengthsFinder quiz, and provides detailed description of each strength that the quiz identifies — especially how those strengths might connect to career trajectories. Strengths-based assessments reinforce the theory of education that “every student can learn under the proper conditions of appropriate challenge and support” (Schreiner 2013, p. 106). But remember: Strengths aren’t simply innate characteristics that inevitably lead to success; they are at most predispositions that can be developed by students into tools for success, but only with sustained hard work, peer support, and expert guidance (Schreiner 2013). You can find out more from the Gallup web site <http://www.strengthsquest.com>

Of course, none of these instruments are designed to be all-encompassing, and all of them continue to be the subject of study and debate among practitioners. For example, the MBTI has been criticized for low “test-retest reliability,” with concerns that “if you retake the test after only a five-week gap, there is around a 50 per cent chance that you will fall into a different personality category compared to the first time you took the test” (Krzmaric

2012). This is related to another concern about the MTBI: that rather than falling into the extremes of easily-discernable personality categories, most people probably fall in the middle of the scale, with the test randomly classifying them on one or the other side of the spectrum. Finally, some critics of the MBTI, especially because of its origins outside of mainstream, empirical psychological research, suspect that there is a large “Barnum Effect” involved in its results — in other words, as showman P.T. Barnum said about the big top and sideshow spectacle of the circus, people flock to it simply because it has “a little something for everybody” (Paul 2006).

While the Big Five personality scheme has more support among academic psychology and business administration researchers, it too has been critiqued in similar ways as the MBTI. For example, researchers question whether individuals respond to personality quizzes honestly, or whether they simply report what they think the testers want to hear (especially if those quizzes are used for employment screening). One study argued, “as many as 88 percent of job applicants actually hired after taking the NEO PI-R had intentionally raised their Conscientiousness score” in order to be more attractive as potential employees (Paul 2006). But even if such quizzes can provide useful information about individuals, argues Northwestern University psychologist Dan McAdams, they fail to do anything more than scratch the surface of one’s true and complex identity: “How would the Big Five classify a man who is usually passive, McAdams asks, but becomes pugnacious when directly challenged? How would it label a woman who is customarily reserved, but turns talkative when she’s nervous? What would it do with a person who is generally unemotional, but who falls apart when offered sincere sympathy? Just as we don’t really know a new acquaintance until we’re versed in such subtleties, McAdams suggests, psychologists can’t know a subject until they look past the static Big Five” (Paul 2006).

Such concerns should remind us that it is perfectly OK to disagree with the results you receive from any of these personality, character, or strengths quizzes. In fact, the surprise you might feel at the way a particular set of quiz results characterizes you can provide a great motivation for further critical reflection: write down and explain why you disagree with the results, in a way that would help you explain your preferred career trajectory to a peer, an adviser, or a potential employer. And even if these tools do seem to give you useful feedback, think about whether they are providing information that helps you tell a consistent “career story,” or whether they point to surprising differences that might be worth exploring through the kinds of activities discussed next in chapter 5 (especially hands-on internship, research, or service experiences).

For more online self-assessment tools, you might explore O\*NET, the U.S. Department of Labor career exploration and job analysis site, at <http://www.online.onetcenter.org>

## Challenge-Action-Result statements

In job interviews, research shows that employers want to hear how candidates have met specific educational or workplace challenges, using the unique and powerful skills they have gained through both education and experience, to achieve positive results. A powerful technique in preparing for such an interview is the Challenge-Action-Result (CAR) reflection. In this exercise, students work through a list of possible skills for a particular job or career and then try to come up with at least one succinct **CAR statement** for each, in the following format:

- **Challenge:** Describe a specific situation or task that you needed to accomplish or resolve, whether through a paid job, schoolwork, a volunteer position, or even something that you simply decided to pursue on your own.
- **Action:** Describe the specific steps you took to address the challenge, demonstrating how you mobilized your skills, education, or strengths.
- **Result:** Describe the positive outcome and how your employer, your classmates, your community, or you yourself benefited by your actions. Use numbers to quantify your results and show how your work impacted your grade, your organization's revenue, or your community.

Here is an example of a CAR statement:

**Challenge:** Office needed to convert from one database to another.  
**Action:** Accurately entered over 200 records into an Access database.  
**Result:** More efficiently tracked client outcomes; 25 new sales leads.

CAR statements should speak directly to skills that employers value, in a language they understand. Some career advisers call these skills **salable success factors**, arguing that “The assumption that past performance predicts future performance is used extensively by the best-trained interviewers” (Schilling 2014).

### **Salable Success Factors Valued by the Employer**

Prepare responses, noting your Assignment, Action, and Accomplishment

**Money**—Think of a time you saved or made money for a campus organization or summer employer.

**Public Speaking**—Did you ever have occasion to speak in public? How did you prepare yourself?

**Time**—Describe an action you took that increased productivity or saved time for an internship or co-op employer.

**Adaptability**—Describe a situation when you were called on to be flexible or adapt to a new situation.

**Efficiency**—Can you think of a problem you solved speedily, logically, and accurately? Did your math major help?

**Helping others**—Think of a time when you helped someone in your community, on campus, in your family.

**Organization**—What event, activity or project have you planned and implemented from beginning to end?

**Perseverance**—Describe a time when you had to handle challenges and obstacles to complete a particularly difficult task or assignment.

**Teamwork**—Were you ever involved with any team projects, sports, or activities? How did you and your team work to solve a particular problem?

**Innovation**—Have you ever come up with a new idea for an organization or summer employer?

**Hiring or recruiting**—Have you ever hired people or recruited volunteers? What skills did you find helpful?

**Making Improvements**—Have you ever observed the way something was done and figured out a better way to do it?

**Risk-Taking**—What was the last “risky” situation you were involved in?

Schilling (2014)

When composing CAR statements about your salable success factors, you should always try to quantify your results with numbers, action verbs, and proper nouns. How long was your role? How many goals did you score? How many people were involved? How much money was raised? How many hours a week? How many customers did you assist? How long was your research paper? Be as specific as you can.

For example, “I contributed to raising money to fight cancer” doesn’t tell the employer anything. However, if you tell the employer “I contributed 10 hours to the Walkathon to Fight Cancer. I registered 200-300 people on race day.

Behind the scenes, I prepared nearly 500 race packs and recruited four volunteers,” then the employer has actual evidence that you’re comfortable dealing with plenty of strangers, that you’re willing to put your head down and work without recognition, that you cared about this event, and that you sought to involve others.

One reason that such specific CAR statements are so important is because many top employers are increasingly using a new interview strategy called **competency-based interviewing**. Sometimes referred to as **behavioral interviewing**, this is when interviewers “use behavioral questions to help the interviewer assess candidates based on critical competencies identified for the position.” Such questions are meant to replace “think on your feet” interview questions which might demonstrate how a candidate reacts to stress, but do not supply any information on how the candidate would actually perform in a particular work role. In other words, “managers are taught to ask candidates behavioral questions, based on the theory that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. [...] The managers are then asked to assess how competent the candidate is in several critical areas” (Kessler 2006).

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*A question from a competency-based interview script*

Results and Performance Driven	Key Examples
<i>Goal oriented; remains persistent when obstacles are encountered; encourages others to be accountable for their actions; relentlessly focused and committed to customer service; thinks creatively.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Flawless execution</b>—Holds self, direct reports, and others accountable for seamless and compliant execution of tasks and projects.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Accepts stretch goals</b>—Eagerly embraces stretch goals; measures achievements through metrics.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Customer centric thinking</b>—Makes the customer the center for all decisions to build value; imposes customer focus on others and challenges them to exceed customer expectations.</li> </ul>

**Planned Behavioral Questions**

1. Describe an instance when you were particularly effective at achieving end results. What steps did you take to achieve these results?
2. Think of an example when you consistently exceeded internal or external customer expectations. How did you do this? What approach did you use?
3. Provide an example of a project or team you managed in which there were many obstacles to overcome. What did you do to address those obstacles?
4. Tell me about an example of what you have done to obtain information to better understand a customer. What did you do? How did this information improve your customer service?
5. It is not always easy to achieve required work goals or objectives. Describe a stretch goal or objective that you were able to achieve. Why was this a stretch goal? What was the result?

Kessler (2006)

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Good CAR statements will help you to supply direct, succinct answers in a competency-based interview. For example, you might try to develop CAR statements for each of the following ten competencies that employers report seeking most often:

1. Ability to work in a team structure
2. Ability to make decisions and solve problems
3. Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work
4. Ability to verbally communicate inside and outside the organization
5. Ability to obtain and process information
6. Ability to analyze quantitative data
7. Technical knowledge related to the job
8. Proficiency with computer software programs
9. Ability to create and/or edit written reports
10. Ability to sell or influence others

In reflecting on how you'd demonstrate these skills, the "Challenge" doesn't have to be a crisis, or even a problem. A lot of students immediately comb their memories for those negative situations, and when they can't recall one, the resulting CAR statement is sort of flimsy and personally meaningless. Consider any kind of task, goal, objective, situation, job, or class that pushed you to act. You probably even have examples of your strengths buried in seemingly unexceptional events.

## **A lifetime of critical reflection and the 75/25 rule**

The tools for visual concept mapping, personal profile quizzing, and CAR statements described in this chapter are only a few of the many reflective activities that students might find valuable in their career search — and in their academic work in general. For example, many courses in the liberal arts and sciences include "reading response" or "reflection journal" assignments where students write reactions, ideas, and questions about what they are working on in class on a regular basis, revisiting these at the end as study guides and learning assessment tools. Often these classes will ask students to post at least some of these reflections online, to build a small community of peers that read and consider each others' reflections, enlarging each of their own perspectives on the course material (Thompson et al 2008). You can do

this in your career search as well. In fact, as the next chapter will discuss, posting ideas and questions to online social networks (either individually or as part of a group discussion) is a great way to bring your reflections to a like-minded audience.

Another tool students might find useful is the **seven stories process**, described in the book *So what are you going to do with that?* by Susan Basalla and Baggie Debelius (2015):

Write down twenty enjoyable accomplishments from any time in your life. Include anything you enjoyed doing that you also did well. You can mix childhood memories with recent events, and big professional moments with trivial victories. Anything goes. It may take you a day or two to come up with your list of twenty. Then pick out the seven stories that speak to you most strongly: the ones that were the most satisfying, the most characteristic of who you think you are.

Next, write a paragraph about each of the seven accomplishments, describing what you did well and how it made you feel. Note the skills that you demonstrated in each circumstance. As you go through the stories, you'll notice remarkable overlap between them. The qualities that you've always taken for granted will most likely turn out to be qualities that lead to your greatest successes. We often don't give ourselves credit for certain skills because they've always just been part of who we are.

Finally, you can start to see how those skills add up to a personality profile by asking yourself a few questions on the basis of these stories: What kind of environment do I thrive in? What kind of projects do I like to work on? What skills do I enjoy using most? When am I most proud of myself?"

The seven stories method points to an important outcome of any reflection exercise: imagining your **best possible self** and your best possible future. As described by professional academic advisers, "This step is not primarily about career planning or major selection, but about the kind of person a student wants to become" and "those aspects of oneself that one most wants to embody in the future" (Schreiner 2013, p. 110). To imagine your best possible self, you might consider reflecting on the following questions:

- What do you see yourself doing as a result of being a college graduate that you cannot do now?
- How would you describe the person you want to become? What is that person like? What is that person able to do? What kind of relationships does that person have?
- What will it take for you to grow toward becoming that person?



Psychological research has suggested that “visualizing one's best possible self leads to more positive emotions and higher levels of motivation” (Schreiner 2013).

No matter what kind of tool you use for critical reflection as you develop your career story, remember to make regular time for this activity, because it is only through reflecting on what you do — and why you do it — that you can articulate for others the importance of your experiences, skills and goals. As the authors of one recent college career guide suggested, try to follow the so-called **75/25 rule**: “spending 75 percent of your time thinking and 25 percent of your time doing.” (Terhune & Hays 2013) This advice applies whether you’re trying to finish a small class assignment or trying to find your next long-term career-building step. But it takes discipline and commitment to allow yourself to stop and think: “If you are going to spend 75 percent of your time thinking and 25 percent of your time doing, you are going to have to slow down. You are going to have to take deep breaths, and you are going to have to take them regularly. You need to spend parts of every day, every week, and every month unplugged and disconnected from the rest of the world.” (Terhune & Hays 2013)

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ONLINE RESOURCE

**Career Exploration Center**

<https://cec.ccas.wisc.edu>

**L&S SuccessWorks**

<http://careers.ls.wisc.edu/>  
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Don’t disconnect entirely though. Remember, the professionals at the **Career Exploration Center** (in Ingraham Hall) and **L&S SuccessWorks** (above the University Bookstore) are available to provide expert guidance for all of these reflection tools and more. In the next chapter, we’ll use these tools of critical reflection for one of the most important choices students face during college: picking a major.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is “critical reflection” and why is it valuable in career exploration?
2. What is “visual concept mapping” and how can it help as an aid to critical reflection?
3. What are some of the risks and benefits to using personality-profile quizzes to figure out what kind of career path to pursue?
4. What are “CAR statements” and how can they be useful in résumé-building?
5. What is a “competency based interview” and how should students prepare to succeed in this kind of situation?
6. What is the “75/25 rule” and how does it connect to critical reflection?

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

**Susan Basalla and Maggie Debelius, “*So What Are You Going to Do with That?*”: *Finding Careers Outside Academia*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015).** Career guide ostensibly directed at graduate students pursuing “alt-academic” careers, but valuable for all college students as well.

**Donald Clifton, Edward Anderson and Laurie Schreiner, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career and Beyond* (New York: Gallup Press, 2006).** Original publication of Clifton’s StrengthsQuest instrument for popular audiences.

**Annie Murphy Paul, *The Cult of Personality Testing: How Personality Tests are leading us to Miseducate our Children, Mismanage our Companies, and Misunderstand Ourselves* (New York: Free Press, 2006).** More of a journalistic history of different personality testing schemes and theories than the polemic that its strident title would suggest, this book provides a good background which balances personality testing advocacy claims with numerous skeptics’ arguments.

**Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).** Classic statement of critical reflection from a scholar of the social work professions.

**Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).** Popular psychology guide to the value of character in relation to work success and satisfaction.

**Sue Thompson and Neil Thompson, *The Critically Reflective Practitioner* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).** Modern handbook on critical reflection, designed for social work professionals.

**Paul D. Tieger, Barbara Barron, and Kelly Tieger, *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You through the Secrets of Personality Type*, 5th ed. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014).** Popular career search handbook based on the MBTI instrument.