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Writing Your Self-Assessment

We believe that if you take the time to *write down* your self-assessment conclusions, they will be much more useful to you not only now, but also in the future. The writing does several things. First, it forces you to put into words thoughts, impressions, and feelings. This process causes one to think more clearly and carefully about the nuances and meanings of those thoughts, impressions, and feelings. And after all, that is what self-assessment is all about—to make explicit what is already within you in a way that is useful.

Second, once the words are on paper, you can gain some emotional distance from them and view them a bit (not a lot) more objectively than you can in your head or heart. The paper provides a means of detaching the conclusions so that you can consider them.

Third, the paper also provides a greater opportunity for you to check your self-assessment against the views of others. Spouses, partners, family, close friends, and others who know you well may provide interesting confirmations or questions about your life theme conclusions. Those conversations, based on a list of life themes, can stimulate your thinking to further clarify the labels.

Fourth, a written record of your self-assessment will help you to monitor your growth, change, and development over time. It is much easier to see those changes when you can *read* what you concluded in the past rather than when you must try to *remember* the conclusions and then compare them with a current self-assessment.

Finally, writing your self-assessment will sharpen your inductive skill greatly. As humans, we often jump (occasionally, leap) to conclusions that are not well founded in facts. Our minds race ahead so quickly that the weakness of the logical connections may not be considered or even recognized, especially when the topic is charged with emotion, as it is in a self-assessment. Slowing down enough to write out the data and the conclusions you draw from the data forces you to look at the connections between those data and conclusions and to consider their strengths. That mental, analytic skill is one which has application far beyond the self-assessment process. It will help as a person in business, in society, in relationships, in science, wherever.

Procedures and Guidelines

We encourage you to approach writing your self-assessment in two steps. First, develop a *single* theme. Choose one of the many that probably have occurred to you by now and search through the data to see if it is supported. Collect the data on cards or a piece of paper. We have provided another worksheet for you (Exhibit 20–1). If the format appeals to you, use it. If not, devise your own method for developing this theme. Note the contradictory evidence. Phrase the label. Recheck the connections between label and data. Revise the label. Recheck the data pool in light of the revised label.

Then, when you have completed a single theme and written out its name (label) and the related referenced data, show it to someone. Talk about it.

Exhibit 20-1

Life Theme Development Worksheet

Theme Label: _____

Sources	Data

Contradictory Evidence

Retrace your steps. How did you go about assembling it? How long did it take? How could you be more efficient? Does the label and the process feel right to you? Why or why not? You may wish to discuss this in class if you are in one.

Having completed a single theme and taken some time to debrief that experience, you can then go on to complete your written self-assessment by repeating the process you used and revised to develop your initial theme.

The Number of Themes

After you have analyzed all available data and found all the themes you can, you may wonder whether the number of themes identified is typical or appropriate—or whether you are still missing something.

Our experience suggests that the number of themes that can be generated depends to some extent on the number and type of data-generating instruments used. Using the devices in this book, you normally will find about fifteen to twenty-five themes in a good analysis. Initial analyses based on data from only three or four devices may yield as many as a dozen "tentative" themes that, while not yet convincing, look promising. Good analyses based on more than our devices will generally not produce more than thirty well-supported themes.

Sometimes people are not able to locate more than a dozen convincing themes in their data. Usually they simply haven't looked hard or long enough, but that is not the only reason. Sometimes a person, either consciously or unconsciously, tries to find themes that are completely "independent"—that do not, in a sense, overlap. Similarly, one sometimes looks for themes that fit into a limited number of categories, such as "skills," "values," and "goals." In both cases, the underlying problem is the same: The person is imposing a model or a set of constraints on the data, thereby limiting what the data can say. As we have said before, it is essential to effective thematic development that one let the data speak for themselves.

A different set of factors is often associated with an analysis containing thirty to forty themes. Often many of these themes say almost the same thing: The degree of overlap is extreme. Or many of the themes may be supported by very few data. In either instance, many similar themes can usually be collapsed into more general and better-supported themes without the loss of any important information.

A good self-assessment does not have to contain a certain quota of themes. But our experience strongly suggests that if you end up with less than fifteen or more than thirty themes, it is wise to re-examine them carefully.

Assessing the Accuracy and Importance of Themes

Before you accept a set of themes as final, you have to judge the importance and accuracy of each theme that has been located and labeled. Judgment is required, because no rules, outside of one's own common sense, are available for determining whether the evidence supporting some theme is "enough" to ensure its accuracy, or whether the amount of evidence suggests that a theme is of great importance, moderate importance, or minor importance.

The questions one needs to raise in making this judgment are fairly obvious ones:

1. How many data seem to support the theme? A theme supported by ten data certainly has a greater chance of being accurate and important than one supported by only three.
2. Where do these data come from? Do they all come from just one of the data-generating devices, or do they come from more than one? A theme supported by data from four different instruments seems more likely to be accurate and important than one supported by data from only one source.
3. How many, if any, data contradict the theme? Any contradictory datum raises the question of a theme's validity. But a theme with ten data supporting it and one contradicting it would quite reasonably be handled differently from a theme with four data supporting it and two contradicting it.

One might suppose that, because precise decision rules are lacking, judgments about themes tend to be highly idiosyncratic. However, we have not found this to be the case. Most people, when looking at the same set of themes, tend to make similar judgments regarding the accuracy and importance of each one.

For an example of a final set of themes in a self-assessment, refer to Lauren Davis's self-assessment paper (see case, pp. 000–00). The self-assessment paper assignment that follows is one we have given to our students to guide their efforts; it may be of some help to you.

Self-Assessment Paper Assignment

Purpose

The self-assessment paper (SAP) is designed to help you develop a set of life themes from the data you

have generated so that you can use those themes to establish goals and ideas for work and career. The paper is also intended to develop your skills at analyzing large and complex pools of data and at seeing the trends and patterns in that data.

Content

The SAP should stand by itself; that is, a person should be able to read it without the benefit of background information and be able to follow the logic and conclusions easily.

The paper should include the following elements:

1. A brief introduction that establishes the date, the nature of the assignment, and any background you would like to include.

2. A body containing theme labels and related data. Your logic, especially as it connects data and theme labels, should be crystal clear. We suggest putting one theme per page, with the label at the top and those data and their sources beneath. Separate supporting and contradictory evidence. Number each theme.

Quote data verbatim, then *add* any interpretation if necessary. Citing, for example, paragraph 3 of the written interview but providing *only* interpretation of that paragraph makes it difficult to assess your logic. When you use data from quantitatively scored instruments, cite the scores. Citing the Strong-Campbell without showing scores and your interpretations of those scores does not reveal your logic. Your purpose is in part to demonstrate—to communicate—the logic connecting individual data to the theme label.

Also, remember that *variety* of sources of data lend strength to a theme. A theme supported by data from eight different sources is more believable than one supported by data from two sources. Don't neglect the Feelings Record and other "less formal" instruments. Feel free to include data from sources like journals, other tests, letters, and so on. If you do, include them in your binders.

If the volume of your supporting data for a theme runs on for two pages, feel free to cite only the 10 to 20 *strongest* bits of evidence and then to sum- marize in one line the volume of additional data not presented.

Be *sure* to recognize and cite contradictory evidence where you find it. If the volume of contradictory evidence is large, perhaps you have two themes rather than one in that pool of data.

3. A description of things that you believe about yourself (preferably in theme label format) which are important to career decisions, but which did not emerge in your data pool.

4. A conclusion that includes a brief description of your level of confidence in the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and importance of the themes. Include a list of your themes (on one page). Include also a consideration of the dilemmas, tradeoffs, or conflicts suggested in your themes.

Format

Your SAP must be typed. *Maximum* length is thirty-five pages. Put a *copy* of your paper in your blue binder under the blue tab marked Self-Assessment Paper. Then hand in your binder (with *all* of your data and interpretations). Keep the original of your paper. You will need it in class.

Criteria for a Good
Self-Assessment Paper

1. Demonstrates understanding of various instruments.
2. Clear logic between data and theme labels.
3. Sufficient volume of supporting data for themes.
4. Recognizes contradictory evidence.
5. Cites a variety of sources for each theme where possible.
6. Well-written theme labels.
7. Adequate range and volume of themes.
8. Themes grouped where appropriate and ranked.
9. Implications address a variety of dimensions.
10. Readable, easy to follow and check.
11. Reasonable length.