

Brainstorming and Prewriting

This Tip Sheet includes a few ideas to help any writer, novice or advanced, start a project. You can try one tip at a time, or blend techniques together.

Consider the Purpose

Before you can even begin to generate ideas for a paper, you must understand the assignment itself. Understanding what you are asked to examine in your paper is a vital step in the pre-writing process, and doing this can help generate ideas. If there is an assignment sheet, read it thoroughly multiple times while asking yourself questions like “Am I being asked to persuade, to analyze, or both?” to help focus your aim as you develop the paper. When you focus on the intention (or purpose) of the assignment you will open yourself up to topics and ideas about which to write.

Consider the Audience

You also need to consider who you are writing for. Who is your audience? Is it just your professor? A layperson? What does your audience already know about the topic, and what do they need to know in order to understand your paper? Exercising this thought process will help you to develop a starting point for your assignment, especially concerning what information should be omitted, and what needs to be initially established in your paper. What needs to be established generally comes down to what information your audience may be unaware of, and needs to know.

Ask Questions

Once you have a topic, ask yourself really basic questions, like *Who? What? When? Where? Why? And How?* This technique is especially helpful in writing a research paper, but it works for all sorts of writing assignments. If it helps, write each question on a sheet of paper giving yourself enough room to write your answers.

Try to answer all of these questions. The questions you cannot answer may indicate that you need to revisit the overall assignment to better understand the prompt or that you need to do more research on your topic.

Make a List

Making a list is helpful no matter what stage you are on in the writing process. If you’re deciding on a topic, make a list. If you’re searching for points to support your thesis, make a list.

For example, if your assignment is to write a research paper about a topic related to World War I, make a list of everything you know, like “Franz Ferdinand, trenches, nationalists, Treaty of Versailles...” Once you have a pretty good list, go back and circle the ideas or topics that you find the most interesting (the best papers are written by authors who genuinely like their topic). Finally, take those few topic ideas and make another list of words or phrases that come to mind. If you find the Treaty of Versailles to be the most interesting, your list might become “Hall of Mirrors, Paris Peace Conference, League of Nations...” You may discover a more specific topic to research or information to support your thesis.

This technique can also be applied to your thesis. Instead of starting with a general topic, use your thesis and make a list of ideas using the information you have that supports your claim. This can help you find flaws or weaknesses in your argument. For example, if the list you make for your thesis is too long, you may consider narrowing your main argument. If the list is too short, you may need to revise your thesis altogether.

Freewrite

Freewriting is a great combatant to writer's block. With this method, you take the vague ideas in your head and try to turn these thoughts into words, no matter how roughly written. Just put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard, and *write!* Ignore grammar and clarity at this point in the process. What matters here is that ideas are placed on paper. Then you can begin to synthesize them, or make connections and develop new ideas altogether.

Clustering/Mapping/Webbing

If you are a visual learner, clustering your ideas on paper can help you get your writing started. First, write down the main topic in the middle of the page and circle it. Think about that topic and write down the first thing that comes to mind on a different place of the page. Keep writing down your ideas and circling them. When you feel like you have a pretty good amount of ideas, start connecting them simply by drawing lines from one to the next, clustering them into groups. Here's an example of clustering:

