

Brainstorming and Prewriting

This Tip Sheet includes a few ideas to help any writer, novice or advanced, start a project.

BRAINSTORMING

First, You Should 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 assess 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 assignment’s intention (or purpose), you will open yourself up to topics and ideas about which to write.

Second, Consider the Audience

It always helps if you also consider who you are writing for. Who is your audience? Is it just your teacher? Your peers? What does your audience already know about the topic, and what do they need to know to understand your paper? Following this thought process will help you to develop a starting point for your assignment, especially concerning what information should be left out and what needs to be included in your paper. What needs to be established generally comes down to what information your audience may be unaware of and needs to know.

Next, Ask Questions

Once you have a topic, ask basic questions, like *Who? What? When? Where? Why? And How?* This technique is helpful in writing a research paper but works for all 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 general assignment to understand the prompt better or that you need to do more research on your topic.

PREWRITING

There are several strategies for pre-writing. Below are several that you could try:

Make a List

Making a list is helpful no matter what stage you are 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, list 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.

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 synthesize them, make connections, and develop new ideas.

Clustering/Mapping/Webbing

Clustering your ideas on paper can help you start your writing if you are a visual learner. 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 in a different place on 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:

