THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Writing Center
(614) 688-5865 • http://cstw.osu.edu

Getting Started

Getting started on a writing assignment can be extremely difficult, but there are some techniques that you can use to generate ideas. Not all of these methods will be helpful for every occasion or for every writer, but experimenting with these techniques will, more often than not, help you to choose a subject, generate a thesis, organize your ideas, or just simply jump-start your writing process.

Asking Questions
Begin with the basics. If you have a topic for your paper, such as student riots near campus, you can develop a more specific direction (and eventually a thesis) by asking and answering some basic questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? You will likely find that your answers generate more questions. Try to view each question from as many angles as possible.

Example:

Topic: Student riots near campus
Questions: Who is responsible for the rioting? Where and when do the riots occur? What are the effects of the riots? How could the riots be stopped? What are the underlying causes of the riots?

Keep in mind that some people may disagree with your answers. How might they have answered the questions? Why? Thinking about how others may disagree can help you anticipate and respond to questions that your readers may have about your point of view.

Freewriting
Sometimes, if you simply begin by writing the first ideas that come into your mind, you will find that new ideas will occur to you as you write. The key to such freewriting is to write continuously, whether you feel like you are producing new ideas or not. The goal is to generate ideas, not polished writing. If you liberate yourself from the idea of "getting it right the first time" you will be freed of the inhibitions that often result in writer's block. Of course, you should not include unedited freewriting in your finished draft.

Brainstorming
Without even worrying about putting your ideas into sentences, simply list ideas in the order in which they occur to you. Each idea you list may suggest others. You can also discuss the topic with a friend.

Example:

Topic: Choosing a major.
Brainstorming:

- Making a living
- Getting rich
- What's enjoyable to study
- Extending interests
- Broadening intellect
- Meeting interesting people
- Difficulty of courses
- Social expectations
- Parental expectations
- Availability of jobs

At some point, you will want to organize what you write according to the importance of each idea.

Clustering

If you are a more visual learner, it may be helpful to put your ideas into visual relations. Start by writing your topic in the middle of the page and circling it. Write the first thing that occurs to you about the topic elsewhere on the page. As ideas occur to you, write them down and circle them. Draw lines connecting the ideas, and perhaps short explanatory notes about the connections between the ideas. Cluster similar ideas together to categorize your ideas.