



THE WRITING PROCESS

Invention Techniques

Before you begin writing the first draft of an academic paper, you must have a plan. The longer and more in-depth the finished paper is meant to be, the more important it is to have a firm grasp of your intentions: the subject and specific topic you will cover, the scope of your paper, what form your essay will take, your preliminary thesis, the general shape your argument will take, and the material that you will use to support it.

Spending some time determining what you think about a topic, what you know about it, what you believe to be true, what you need to find out, and how you can support your position will allow you to begin the actual work of writing your paper with a sense of purpose. The process of discovering these things is called **invention**.

Included here are several approaches to generating ideas. They can be categorized as **invention techniques** or **prewriting activities** because they are most often done before you have begun working on an actual draft. These techniques or activities will help you to explore various aspects of a topic, ask questions about it, and develop a thesis and supporting ideas for your paper.

INVENTION TECHNIQUES OR PREWRITING ACTIVITIES

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an activity in which you free associate on a topic and create a list of questions, facts, and ideas that occur to you. Brainstorming can be done on your own, or with classmates. When brainstorming, you should feel free to take note of anything that occurs to you about the topic, without worrying about its importance or validity. You should pursue each concept beyond the obvious, however, continuing to note all the associations that occur to you about each aspect of the topic until you have generated a list of concrete details. You can write down sentences, phrases, or individual words, as long as what you write captures the thoughts and associations for you to explore in more depth after your brainstorming session.

Once you have listed a number of items, you can begin sorting them into groups. These groupings can help you get a sense of which of your ideas relate to each other and can probably be integrated into your paper. Doing this sorting will also give you a rough sense of the varying levels of importance of the elements in the list, which will be helpful later, when you begin to organize and develop your paper. Items that do not seem to fit into any of your groupings can probably be discarded as not relevant to your topic. After you sort the items on your list into groups, you can begin to consider which ones seem to require further exploration. You can then brainstorm further on those specific concepts.

Freewriting

Freewriting can serve two purposes. It can serve as a sort of warm-up, a method to get you started writing when you feel “stuck.” It can also be a method of exploring a topic without feeling limited by your own preconceptions, or by concerns about unity, coherence, organization, or correctness. When you freewrite, you write continuously for a short period of time, perhaps five or ten minutes. Without pausing, write whatever comes into your head. Do not worry if you find yourself straying from the topic; just put down whatever thoughts come to you. If you cannot think of anything to say, keep writing anyway—write “I do not know what to say” until the next idea comes to you.

You may find yourself going completely off-topic in freewriting, but you may also find yourself exploring new and unexpected points of view. You may find that you are jumping from one aspect of the topic to another, but you may also find yourself making surprising connections. After you have completed your freewriting, look back over what you have written and try to summarize the most important point that you made about the topic in a sentence or two. Also, take note of any questions about the topic that emerged during your freewriting—they may provide you with a starting point for your research.

Problem Solving: Asking the Right Questions

Categories of Questions

- Definition: What are various ways the topic can be defined?
How does the dictionary define _____?
What do I mean by _____?
What other things can _____ be understood to mean?
- Comparison: How can I place the topic in context?
What is _____ similar to? How?
What is _____ different from? How?
Is _____ superior or inferior to something else, and why?
- Relationship: How do elements of my topic change or interact?
What causes _____?
What are the effects of _____?
What is the end result of _____?
- Evidence: What do I know and what do I need to know about my topic?
What have I heard or read about _____?
What do I not know about _____?
Where would I be likely to find expert information and facts about _____?

- Possibility: How likely or unlikely is an element of my topic to happen?
Is _____ possible or impossible? Why?
If it is possible, has it happened before? What was the outcome?
Is _____ feasible? What would it take to make it happen?

Using a Journalistic Approach: The Five Ws (and an H)

A standard technique that many journalists use in planning and establishing the focus of a piece of writing is to ask and answer a series of questions—the five Ws (and an H). Reporters are taught to begin their story by including information on the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” “why” (and “how”) of the subject of the article.

Writing an academic paper is, of course, different from reporting the news. News articles (as opposed to editorials or opinion pieces) typically convey the facts of the matter, without analysis or opinion, while most academic papers require that the writer take a stance and use her/his analysis of the facts or evidence to support that stance. Nonetheless, answering the five Ws (and an H) during the invention or prewriting stage is a good way to make sure that you have a clear idea of the paper’s purpose.

The answers to those questions can also serve as the basis for your introduction once you begin writing your paper, insuring that you provide all of the information in the first paragraph that your reader will need to follow the development of your argument in the body paragraphs.

Using Resources: Journal Writing and Note-taking

If you have been keeping a journal or taking notes for a course during the time leading up to beginning to write your paper, the journal entries or notes that touch on your topic may be of use during the invention or prewriting stage. Review your notes carefully, and extract any questions, facts or ideas that might be worth further inquiry. Often, an instructor will base a writing assignment on material that has been covered in the course, inviting you to further explore certain issues. Reviewing your notes can help you to connect your paper with what you already know or have discussed during your classes.

As you read over your notes, pay particular attention to sections which relate to the topic of your paper. Note any resources—experts in the field, texts not covered in class—which were mentioned in class, and which may provide a starting point for your research for your paper. Did your instructor mention theories or schools of thought on the issues which remain unresolved, or on which experts hold differing opinions? Are there questions which were not fully answered in your class discussions, and which might provide a starting point for further inquiry?

It is tempting to just “dive in” to writing a first draft of an academic paper. However, time spent in the invention phase, doing prewriting activities such as those described above, is time well spent. Having a firm idea of your specific topic, the question you want to answer, the lines of inquiry you will pursue, and what concepts will be discussed in supporting your thesis will insure that when you do begin your first draft, you are headed in the right direction.