

# Chapter 1: Prewriting and Organizing



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“The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.” —**Anaïs Nin**

This chapter begins with some prewriting strategies to help you generate ideas and pick a topic. In addition to learning ways to overcome writing anxiety (writer’s block), you will also learn how to craft an outline to keep your ideas on course, organize your draft, and tailor it to your audience. Before you actually begin writing, ask yourself the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Which?

For instance, you might ask yourself:

1. Why am I writing?
2. What is my subject?
3. Which subject has the most potential to attract readers?
4. Who is my audience?
5. Where does my background information come from?
6. How can I persuade my readers?

Keeping these questions in mind before, and during, the writing process will help you identify and develop ideas. If you experience difficulties, seek your instructor’s advice to steer you back on course.

## How Do I Pick a Topic?

Have you ever been stressed out because you can't think of a good topic for an important writing assignment? You're not alone. As a student, you'd probably prefer it if professors would just assign topics rather than leave you to find one on your own. However, professors aren't vague because they want to punish you; they usually just don't want to constrain your creativity or discourage you from writing about topics that truly interest you. Professors also want to be surprised by their students' ingenuity, and very few teachers want to read a big stack of essays all on the same stale topic. Unfortunately, just being told to "be creative" is unlikely to calm you down when you have a major paper due next week and still haven't found a topic to write about.

Imagine that you are in an introductory literature course. The professor has assigned a 3-5 page essay on a Shakespearean play that requires multiple sources. You try asking the professor to be more specific or offer some suggestions. The professor responds, "No, it's up to you. Surprise me." What do you do?

One smart option is to go to the library and look for scholarly journals that cover Shakespearean studies. In today's environment, many of these journals are housed electronically in databases your college library subscribes to. You might also try scholarly books about Shakespeare and his plays. Browsing these sources should give you some ideas about the aspects of Shakespeare and his plays that scholars have found worth writing about. You might find that an idea that you thought was "totally original" has already been done. However, you shouldn't let this worry you. If every essay or book had to be 100% original, we'd have precious few to read.

If you keep reading and skimming articles and books, you will find many different discussions and possibilities for writing topics. One way to do this is to write a list of binaries, a list of opposing ideas that may represent larger discussions about the topic at hand. Choosing from these opposing ideas in the text will lead you to ideas for a more specific argument. Scholars frequently engage in complex and long-lasting arguments that span across different journal articles and books. Professor X's article on climate change will be mentioned, discussed, or challenged by Professor Y in a book and Professor Z in another article. None of them are worried about saying things that have never been said before; the key is just to say them differently and perhaps better.

You will always have one advantage over any other scholar you read—their articles and books cannot take advantage of all the relevant scholarship that appeared after their publication date. Don't be afraid to freshen up an old article with new supporting evidence—or challenge one whose conclusions are called into question by subsequent research.

You should also look for an issue that you can reasonably cover given the time and space (page count) you have available. After that it's a simple matter of supporting your argument by bringing in relevant quotations from those who agree with you. You should also identify the counter-arguments and provide pertinent background information.

In essence, the easiest way to find a topic to write about is to see what other writers are writing about and join their "conversation." The conversation metaphor is a very useful way to understand what scholarship is all about. Rather than thinking of essays or books as isolated units of scholarship, try envisioning them as the fruits of a massive network of scholars who converse with each other via scholarly documents, conference presentations, e-mail, phone calls, and other forms of communication. Research *what* is available and *where* you can make the most valuable contribution.

## What Are Some Other Ways to Get Ideas?

“The best time for planning a book is while you're doing the dishes.” —**Agatha Christie**

Still stuck even after pouring over all those books and journals? Don't worry. There are plenty of other ways to stimulate your brain.

In general, though, remember that good ideas may arise anytime and anywhere. You might be struck by a brilliant insight as you're running on the treadmill or even while dreaming. Always be prepared to record new ideas. Carry a small notepad with you or use your cell phone to record a voice memo. You might even try writing the idea on a napkin and taking a picture of it. The important thing is to get it down quickly because you're all too likely to forget all about it by the time you're ready to write.

Another good way to generate ideas is to read and listen actively. Your texts and professors will discuss relevant issues in the field, and they might make comparisons to related ideas and other thinkers. A professor might say, “There is still work to be done in this area,” or “there is great controversy over this issue.” Be alert to these sources for good ideas. The biggest mistake a novice writer can make is to rely solely on “inspiration.” As a scholar, you are never alone—don't be afraid to listen and respond to the work of others instead of always trying to be original or profound.

Even chatting with your classmates might help you think of a good topic. You can also check with your college or university's writing center. Many of them have tutors who can help you find and hone a great topic for your paper.

Let's look now at three other techniques for getting those brain juices flowing: brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting.

### What Is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming allows you to quickly generate a large number of ideas. You can brainstorm with others or you can brainstorm by yourself, which sometimes turns into freewriting. To effectively brainstorm, write down whatever ideas come to mind. Sometimes it works better to write down each idea on a separate piece of paper. It also helps to ask yourself some questions:

1. What do I care about or what am I interested in?
2. What do I know that I could teach others?
3. What irritates me?

In order to capture more of your thoughts, you may want to brainstorm a few times until you have enough ideas to start writing.

### Examples

Imagine you are in a class. Your instructor says you will have to write a paper on your favorite free-time activity, and that you must also persuade your reader to try it.

First ask yourself, *What do I care about?* or *What am I interested in?*

It is easiest to write about a topic that you are interested in. This could be anything from gardening to ice skating, or from writing poetry to playing the piano. Your list, in this example, would then read:

1. gardening
2. ice skating

3. writing poetry
4. playing the piano

At this stage, every idea is good because you are trying to come up with as many ideas as possible. Second, ask yourself, *What do I know that I could teach others?*



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You may be able to teach someone else something that you really enjoy. Good for you. If you cannot, don't worry; you are still just brainstorming. Perhaps you teach swimming lessons or t-ball, or maybe you bake really well and are able to offer some of your insights. Your list, in this example, would then read:

1. swimming lessons
2. t-ball
3. baking

Anything is fine. You are still brainstorming.

Let's think of another example. How about the common situation in which the instructor wants you to write about "something you care about" or an "issue you have"?

Again start by asking yourself a question. Ask yourself, *What irritates me?*

Everyone has things that irritate them, some small and others large. An example of something small that's irritating could be people in your dorm who leave trails of toothpaste by the sink and never clean up after themselves. A personal example can be useful as a bridge to a larger issue that will be your topic—in this case it could be community living and personal responsibility.

In academic writing with a less personal slant, the source of irritation is often another writer/theorist with whom you disagree. Your "irritation" then would lead to an effective piece about why you have a better conception of what's really going on. A less direct version of this would be a writer/theorist who makes some good points but lacks something in his/her argument that you can add to the "conversation."

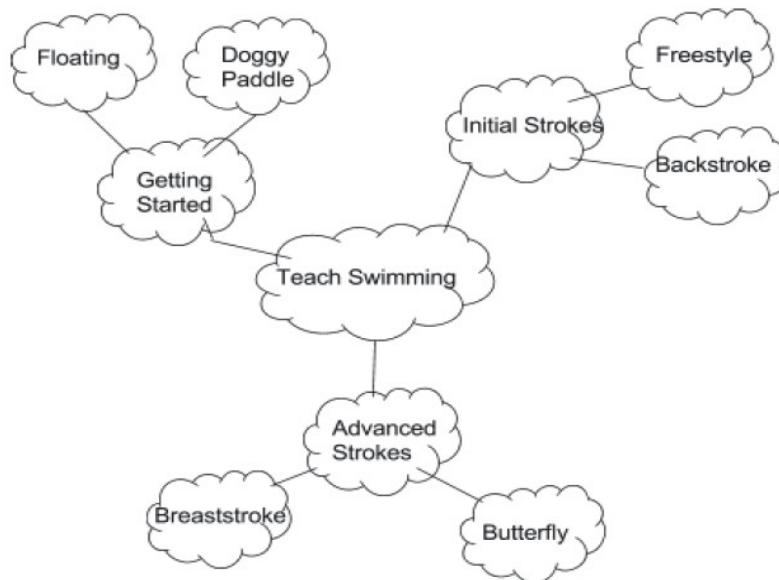
A majority of academic writing begins with brainstorming. Go ahead! Try one or many of the ideas for brainstorming either by yourself or in a group. Working together to come up with ideas means that there are more ideas coming from many different minds.

## What Is Clustering?

Clustering is a process in which you take your main subject idea and draw a circle around it. You then draw lines out from the circle that connect topics that relate to the main subject in the circle. Clustering helps ensure that all aspects of the main topic are covered.

### Example

After using the brainstorm example, let's say you decided on swimming lessons as your topic. Your main idea of swimming lessons would be circled in the center of your page. Anything else that you want to say about swimming lessons you would connect to the circle with lines. You can also add more lines to extend the ideas that relate to thoughts around the circle. When finished, your clustering might look like the following:



## What Is Freewriting?

Freewriting helps generate ideas and set them in motion. To begin, start writing without worrying about spelling or grammatical errors. You should write your ideas naturally and spontaneously so that you can record many ideas quickly. Do not look back at what you wrote until you are satisfied that you have written enough. An easy way to freewrite is to set a time limit and then begin writing. You can write anything at all, and in the end, you will often find some quality ideas scattered throughout your writing.

### Example

1. I set my kitchen timer for a specific amount of time. Let's say 5 minutes.
2. I just begin writing without worrying about what I am putting onto the page.

Things I like to do. Watching TV is a great way to unwind after a long day. Playing video games is too. I like talking to my friend Steph on the phone, but I get annoyed when she doesn't call me back. I like shopping. My favorite store is Target. They have everything that you need there. I can buy clothing, luggage, things I need for my kitchen, wall coverings. I love that store. I like going to the theater. Last year, I saw *The West Side Story*. It was amazing. For some reason, I always look forward to fall and spring yard work. I don't know if it is the sense of accomplishment I feel when the yard is ready for the season or what, but I really do enjoy it. There are so many things that need to be done each year too. In the spring, you need to be sure to fertilize before...

3. The timer goes off, so I stop writing.
4. At this point, I review what I have written and decide which point(s) to elaborate on.

With these simple writing tips, you should be able to find a topic and begin the process of writing the assigned paper. Established authors use brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting, so you're in good company when you use these techniques to help you overcome writer's block or writing anxiety. After all, your indecision is only a question, and to quote the popular college text *Writing Analytically*, "learning to write is largely a matter of learning how to frame questions." If none of these work for you, try to come up with your own strategy. What works for someone else may not work for you. After all, these prewriting strategies are just ways to put your ideas on the paper so you can develop them at a later time. Try to enjoy the process of writing instead of seeing writing only as the chore of finishing an assignment your instructor has given you. Done this way, writing might become a pleasure that can also improve your critical thinking ability.

## Starting with a Thesis Statement

Most students like to write their thesis statement before they begin actually drafting their essays. Consider this "thesis statement" a working thesis that can be modified and changed based on the needs of the essay as it develops.

Thesis statements vary based on the rhetorical strategy of the essay and are described in detail in each rhetorical chapter, but every thesis statement shares the following characteristics:

- Presents the main idea
- Most often is one sentence
- Tells the reader what to expect

- Is a formal summary of your essay topic
- Usually worded to have an argumentative edge
- Uses third person point of view

## How Do I Make an Outline?

Developing an outline, such as the examples below, can be helpful because you can keep an overview of what you want to say, check whether you have covered everything, and find what is out of scope and should be excluded. The outline can grow during the writing process as new points come to mind.

### Outline example I

- I. Introduction and Thesis  
Brief description of issues that arise when reading *Hamlet*
- II. Issues of feminism uncovered through reading *Hamlet*
  - a. What other scholars have discovered about feminism in *Hamlet*
  - b. Which of these discoveries was most evident to me and how
  - c. Ideas of feminism that I uncovered on my own
- III. How uncovering ideas of feminism in *Hamlet* has led me to better understand what Shakespeare thought of the role women played in society
- IV. Conclusion

### Outline example I

- I. Mixed marriages  
State this issue briefly, why I am interested in exploring this, and whether this issue exists in my culture
- II. Issues of mixed marriage within my culture
  - a. Is it acceptable to get married to a person who is a different religion?
  - b. Is it acceptable to get married to a person who is a different race?
  - c. What are the advantages or disadvantages of mixed marriages?
- III. Personal experiences
  - a. An example from my own life or my family.
  - b. An example from the news.
- IV. Conclusion