

# Introduction to Prewriting (Invention)

When you sit down to write...

- Does your mind turn blank?
- Are you sure you have nothing to say?

If so, you're not alone. Many writers experience this at some time or another, but some people have strategies or techniques to get them started. When you are planning to write something, try some of the following suggestions.

You can try the textbook formula:

1. State your thesis.
2. Write an outline.
3. Write the first draft.
4. Revise and polish.

. . . but that often doesn't work.

Instead, you can try one or more of these strategies:

## **Ask yourself what your purpose is for writing about the subject.**

There are many "correct" things to write about for any subject, but you need to narrow down your choices. For example, your topic might be "dorm food." At this point, you and your potential reader are asking the same question, "So what?" Why should you write about this, and why should anyone read it?

Do you want the reader to pity you because of the intolerable food you have to eat there?

Do you want to analyze large-scale institutional cooking?

Do you want to compare Purdue's dorm food to that served at Indiana University?

## **Ask yourself how you are going to achieve this purpose.**

How, for example, would you achieve your purpose if you wanted to describe some movie as the best you've ever seen? Would you define for yourself a specific means of doing so? Would your comments on the movie go beyond merely telling the reader that you really liked it?

## **Start the ideas flowing**

Brainstorm. Gather as many good and bad ideas, suggestions, examples, sentences, false starts, etc. as you can. Perhaps some friends can join in. Jot down everything that comes to mind,

including material you are sure you will throw out. Be ready to keep adding to the list at odd moments as ideas continue to come to mind.

Talk to your audience, or pretend that you are being interviewed by someone — or by several people, if possible (to give yourself the opportunity of considering a subject from several different points of view). What questions would the other person ask? You might also try to teach the subject to a group or class.

See if you can find a fresh analogy that opens up a new set of ideas. Build your analogy by using the word like. For example, if you are writing about violence on television, is that violence like clowns fighting in a carnival act (that is, we know that no one is really getting hurt)?

Take a rest and let it all percolate.

Summarize your whole idea.

Tell it to someone in three or four sentences.

Diagram your major points somehow.

Make a tree, outline, or whatever helps you to see a schematic representation of what you have. You may discover the need for more material in some places. Write a first draft.

Then, if possible, put it away. Later, read it aloud or to yourself as if you were someone else. Watch especially for the need to clarify or add more information.

You may find yourself jumping back and forth among these various strategies.

You may find that one works better than another. You may find yourself trying several strategies at once. If so, then you are probably doing something right.

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**Summary:**

This section explains the prewriting (invention) stage of the composing process. It includes processes, strategies, and questions to help you begin to write.

## Prewriting (Invention) General Questions

Beyond the strategies outlined in the previous section, these questions might help you begin writing.

**Explore** the problem — not the topic

1. Who is your reader?

2. What is your purpose?
3. Who are you, the writer? (What image or persona do you want to project?)

### **Make** your goals operational

1. How can you achieve your purpose?
2. Can you make a plan?

### **Generate** some ideas

#### **Brainstorm**

- Keep writing
- Don't censor or evaluate
- Keep returning to the problem

#### **Talk to your reader**

- What questions would they ask?
- What different kinds of readers might you have?

#### **Ask yourself questions**

##### Journalistic questions

Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? So What?

##### Stasis questions

Conjecture: what are the facts? Definition: what is the meaning or nature of the issue? Quality: what is the seriousness of the issue? Policy: what should we do about the issue? For more information on the stases, please go to the OWL resource on [stasis theory](#).

##### Classical topics (patterns of argument)

##### Definition

- How does the dictionary define \_\_\_\_?
- What do I mean by \_\_\_\_?
- What group of things does \_\_\_\_ belong to?
- How is \_\_\_\_ different from other things?
- What parts can \_\_\_\_ be divided into?
- Does \_\_\_\_ mean something now that it didn't years ago? If so, what?
- What other words mean about the same as \_\_\_\_?
- What are some concrete examples of \_\_\_\_?
- When is the meaning of \_\_\_\_ misunderstood?

## Comparison/Contrast

- What is \_\_\_\_ similar to? In what ways?
- What is \_\_\_\_ different from? In what ways?
- \_\_\_\_ is superior (inferior) to what? How?
- \_\_\_\_ is most unlike (like) what? How?

## Relationship

- What causes \_\_\_\_?
- What are the effects of \_\_\_\_?
- What is the purpose of \_\_\_\_? - What is the consequence of \_\_\_\_?
- What comes before (after) \_\_\_\_?

## Testimony

- What have I heard people say about \_\_\_\_?
- What are some facts of statistics about \_\_\_\_?
- Can I quote any proverbs, poems, or sayings about \_\_\_\_?
- Are there any laws about \_\_\_\_?

## Circumstance

- Is \_\_\_\_ possible or impossible?
- What qualities, conditions, or circumstances make \_\_\_\_ possible or impossible?
- When did \_\_\_\_ happen previously?
- Who can do \_\_\_\_?
- If \_\_\_\_ starts, what makes it end?
- What would it take for \_\_\_\_ to happen now?
- What would prevent \_\_\_\_ from happening?

## Tagmemics

### Contrastive features

- How is \_\_\_\_ different from things similar to it?
- How has \_\_\_\_ been different for me?

### Variation

- How much can \_\_\_\_ change and still be itself?
- How is \_\_\_\_ changing?
- How much does \_\_\_\_ change from day to day?
- What are the different varieties of \_\_\_\_?

## Distribution

- Where and when does \_\_\_\_ take place?
- What is the larger thing of which \_\_\_\_ is a part?
- What is the function of \_\_\_\_ in this larger thing?

## Cubing (considering a subject from six points of view)

1. \*Describe\* it (colors, shapes, sizes, etc.)
2. \*Compare\* it (What is it similar to?)
3. \*Associate\* it (What does it make you think of?)
4. \*Analyze\* it (Tell how it's made)
5. \*Apply\* it (What can you do with it? How can it be used?)
6. \*Argue\* for or against it

## Make an analogy

Choose an activity from column A to explain it by describing it in terms of an activity from column B (or vice-versa).

playing cards	writing essays
changing a tire	making peace
selling	growing up
walking	growing old
sailing	rising in the world
skiing	studying
plowing	meditating
launching rockets	swindling
running for office	teaching
hunting	learning
Russian roulette	failing
brushing teeth	quarreling

Rest and incubate.

(Adapted from Linda Flower's Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing, Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan's Writing, and Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke's Prewriting.)

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