

Focused Prewriting

When your teacher first hands you an assignment, you might feel overwhelmed by the task ahead of you. Formulating a plan of action is a good way to attack the assignment. You can begin with some controlled brainstorming. If you have already identified your broad topic and perhaps a few subtopics, try using the suggestions below to elaborate your ideas in a focused way.

1. Look carefully at your assignment to determine the criteria for focusing the assignment.

If your assignment is very specific about which texts or topics must be covered, your brainstorming should only touch on issues that are permitted or required. On the other hand, if your assignment is open-ended, and you are permitted to select a topic of your choice, your exploration can consider any issues or connections that seem useful to you. Hint: Even though the techniques you use to explore the topic are the same in either case, taking a minute to read over the assignment can save you time later. You don't want to waste 10 minutes brainstorming about a great idea that you won't be able to use because of limitations in the assignment itself.

2. Set a time limit for yourself.

We recommend a limit of 7 - 15 minutes. Stick to this time limit. Make yourself work for the entire time. When time is up, walk away for a while to give your brain a rest.

3. Write down everything you find interesting about your broad topic ~ don't stop writing.

Ask yourself what specifically interests you about this topic? What questions or concerns are at stake? What is your topic/concern/problem important? If your mind goes blank, just write "blank blank blank" or repeat the last word over and over. Eventually, a new idea will kick in.

4. Don't censor yourself, no matter how weird, ungrammatical, or misspelled your ideas may seem.

Don't change anything. Don't stop to correct mistakes. You will have plenty of time later on to refine these ideas. Right now, your only goal is to figure out what interests you about your topic.

5. Start thinking about argument.

After time is up and you've given yourself a break, return to your brainstormed ideas. Ask yourself if the ideas have anything in common. Do they add up to a coherent argument? Is there anything you could add or change to make this early argument more cohesive?

6. Start thinking about audience.

Who is the audience for this paper? (We know, we know. Your teacher. What other

potential audiences can you imagine, though?) Is there anything else this audience needs to know for these ideas to make sense? Is there anything you can assume your audience already knows?

7. Start thinking about organization.

Once you've figure out a working argument and identified a tentative audience, think about organization as a way to connect the two. In what order should your ideas be presented to your audience in order to convince them that your argument has merit. Hint: Remember, you are still early in the process, so if you want to move ideas around later on, you can.

8. Start thinking about using texts.

If your assignment requires you to use one or more texts to craft your argument, spend some time revisiting those texts.