

Getting Started on Writing Assignments

Facing that blank computer screen is often the most daunting step while writing a paper. How should one approach writing? Here are some suggestions:

Deconstruct the prompt

Oftentimes, professors will not ask simple one-sentence questions. Prompts are anywhere from one to multiple paragraphs long, and it can seem hard to determine what the professor is really getting at. Think about the prompt as asking two kinds of questions: primary and secondary. The primary question is the question that asks you to make an argument or take a stance. The secondary questions are the professor's way of telling you what kinds of points you should cover or what class material you should draw in. If you can't see a relationship between the primary and secondary questions, or you can't figure out what the primary question is, go to visit your TA. You can also bring your assignment to the Writing Center, where a tutor will help you deconstruct the prompt.

Freewriting

At the very least freewriting compels you to write down something. Set a time limit of 3 or 4 minutes to write everything that relates to the topic in normal paragraph or sentence form. Make sure you begin writing immediately, even if what you are writing sounds inane. Do not be discouraged right off the bat, it may take time to get your thoughts churned out. It is very important to continuously write during the allotted time; you will be amazed at how long 3 minutes can be while freewriting. This is a very informal way of getting ideas out.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming involves compiling lists of relevant issues and ideas. Just sit down and begin writing lists of issues related to your topic. Once you have amassed a modest amount, identify the broad topics and coordinate the specific ideas within the framework of topics.

Mapping

Write down the key element of your essay on the middle of a piece of paper and surround it with a square. Next, write related ideas spanning out from the center, clustering specifics around central themes. Once you are done creating the web of ideas, draw circles around the topics that are most broad and central; these you can use as the main ideas in your paper.

Outlining*

The most formal of these idea-generating methods is the outline. If there are ideas already in your head, from using the above suggestions or not, the outline can help compose them in the order they would appear on your paper. By using this method it is easy to construct a logical ordering of the paragraphs in your paper. Don't wait too long into the writing process to start outlining—this is will help you determine areas where you are missing analysis or gaps in your research.