



WRITING CENTER

Techniques for Pre-Writing

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LIMITING THE SUBJECT

In selecting a topic for a paper, you must limit your topic to a manageable scope. Too broad of a topic and your paper will be too long. Too narrow of a topic and you will not be able to find enough evidence to support your thesis.

From this:

Art history

Late 20th Century Artists

Pop artists

Andy Warhol's art

The impact of pop art

To this:

Not art in all periods, but art in the late 20th century

Not all artists, but pop artists

Not all pop artists, but Andy Warhol

Not all of Andy Warhol's art, but *Marilyn Monroe*

The first time you saw *Tomato Soup* at the Museum of Modern Art

BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming can be done alone or as a group.

1. Write down all ideas that you or a group has on a subject—do not disregard any ideas.
2. Evaluate the ideas after the brainstorming session.
3. Go through the list and mark out all the ideas that will not work or are not interesting.
4. Of the remaining ideas, pick one or two that you might like to write about.
5. To help you to discover what you want to say about this subject, run these ideas through some of the pre-writing techniques in this handout.

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CLUSTERING

Clustering often works well with brainstorming. Clustering is an excellent way to focus ideas, to group details, and to see weak areas. Start with a large sheet of paper. Write the general topic in the center, circle it, and then branch off, becoming more specific as you go out.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What is it?
2. What topic does it belong to, or what topics can it be divided into?
3. How is it like or unlike other objects, events, or ideas?
4. What caused it?
5. What did (or will) it cause?
6. What process does it go through (or has it gone through)?
7. What has been said about it by others?
8. What general ideas and values does it exemplify?
9. What examples are there of the topic?
10. What can be done about it?

LIST-MAKING

List-making can be a valuable first step in many writing situations, especially those that require you to recall an event or understand something. For example, you might list the steps in a process—how to learn to fly—or list arguments for or against something.

A list can:

- Give a definite purpose and activity to get started
- Create associations that you might not have thought of before
- Provide a framework for thinking about the subject

List-making suggestions:

1. In order to stay on-task, give the list a title, e.g. "Causes of World War I".
2. Write as fast as possible and use short words or phrases.
3. Don't be critical of any item on the list at this point; just add as many items as you can in a limited time.

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When the list is finished, you can do several things:

- Select the items on the list that seem to have the most promise
- Put the items on the list in some order. i.e., most important to least important
- Cross out items that do not relate
- Expand one or two items
- Add new items

The completed list should serve as a source of ideas at the beginning of the project.

THE REPORTER'S FORMULA

The reporter's formula is especially good for essay examinations when you have to write something in a hurry. Ask these six questions and quickly write what comes to mind:

- WHO?
- WHAT?
- WHERE?
- WHEN?
- WHY?
- HOW?

Read over your answers to find a single, cohesive message.

WRITING DIALOGUE

Writing dialogue is a pre-writing technique that can quickly lead to good discoveries. Write as though you were talking out loud to yourself. If you get bogged down and need an idea booster, simply become the second voice—ask a question, answer it, and then resume the conversation. Use short, quick answers to keep the ideas flowing.

This approach also generates ideas that you can then use in a second creating technique like cubing.



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CUBING

Cubing looks at a broad subject from six different perspectives or points of view (POV), as if they were the six sides of a cube:

1. Describe it. (Look closely and tell what you see.)
2. Compare it. (What is it similar to? Different from?)
3. Associate it. (What does it remind you of? What other associations come to mind?)
4. Analyze it. (Tell how it's made; make it up if you are not sure.)
5. Apply it. (Tell what you can do with it. How can it be used?)
6. Argue for or against it. (Give any reasons—silly, serious, or in between.)

Quickly write your responses to each POV. When finished, review them. When one angle or perspective seems particularly promising, it may become the focus of your essay.

CLASSICAL INVENTION

In classical invention, ask questions that are arranged according to Aristotle's common topics: definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, and testimony.

Follow these rules for classical invention:

1. Ask questions related to each of Aristotle's common topics one at a time.
2. Write brief notes for answers.
3. If you have no response, skip the question and move on to the next.
4. Record the answers. Mark those that seem most pertinent to the subject.

ARISTOTLE'S COMMON TOPICS

Keep this list handy to help to generate ideas.

1. DEFINITION
 - A. Genus
 - B. Division
2. COMPARISON
 - A. Similarity
 - B. Difference
 - C. Degree

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3. RELATIONSHIP

- A. Cause and effect
- B. Antecedent and consequence
- C. Contraries
- D. Contradictions

4. CIRCUMSTANCE

- A. Possible and impossible
- B. Past fact and future fact

5. TESTIMONY

- A. Authority
- B. Testimonial
- C. Statistics
- D. Maxims
- E. Law
- F. Precedents