Prewriting Techniques

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After You Receive an Assignment:

Read through the assignment twice to better understand your instructor’s expectations. For further assignment tips, check out our Understanding Writing Assignments presentation or handout.

After you fully understand the assignment, it is time to choose a focus or topic for your paper.
Choosing a Topic

In most cases, a broad subject area will be introduced to you by your instructor or from the class material you are studying.

1. Discover an interest within this subject area. An interest is an area of inquiry to explore further.

For example, the broad subject would be American history and an interest from this would be The Civil War.
Discovering an Interest

Sometimes it is difficult to discover an interest. Try finishing the following sentences.

• I am curious about...
• I am confused about...
• Recently I have been thinking a lot about...
Narrowing the Interest

• After choosing an interest, you must narrow it to a plausible topic.

For instance, you may have an interest in the Civil War, but that topic is too broad to write even a forty page paper. Several techniques can help you narrow a topic to a scholarly article or conference paper length. These techniques are often called pre-writing or brainstorming techniques.
Pre-writing Techniques

• Clustering:

Civil War

- Causes
  - Slavery
  - ?
- Main Events
  - Atlanta
  - Gettysburg
- Outcomes
  - Emancipation
  - Poverty
- People of Interest
  - Pres
  - Generals

What else caused the War? Was slavery really the main issue?
Burke’s Pentad

Great when examining human actions:
1. Act: What was done?
2. Scene: When or where was it done?
3. Agent: Who did it?
4. Agency: How did he/she do it? What means or instruments were used?
5. Purpose: Why did he/she do it?
Act: What was done?

Scene: When or where was it done?

Agent: Who did it?

Agency: How did he/she do it? What means or instruments were used?

Purpose: Why did he/she do it?
Free writing

Allow yourself to write or type for ten minutes- don’t stop, don’t worry about typos, and just write everything that comes to mind:

The civil war was not just about slavery, there was social and economic factors and their were also powerful people trying to change the world and stubborn people everyone wanted to be in charge and no one wanted the responsibility for change, slaves were moving on and running away and people were beginning to question things. There is also the aspect of foreign relations and what other countries like England thought of all of this. It is like small branches piling up to make a giant bonfire and abolition was the match that lit it all in flames…I don’t know what else to write.. I guess that maybe I could research some of the political leaders to find out more and maybe look at what was happening in the area with economics and other social issues….I don’t know what else to write now but I bet there is someone in the library who specializes in this area and I can go find the reference librarian that will lead to to to some new ideas and maybe find some support for my ideas……..
Rapid Sketches

Make lists of things that you have noticed, seen recently, or been thinking about that may help you narrow your topic:

- Nothing big and political happens for just one reason
- There are always things hidden beneath the surface
- The American public is (historically) satisfied with the simplified answers
- Slavery could have been abolished without war
- People in power often struggle with ego
- Absolute power corrupts...
- What about religion?
- Better ways to reach the same ends...
Try discussing your ideas with someone else. If your roommate is not in the mood, visit The Write Site!

Me: What do you think caused the Civil War?
You: Slavery, duh!
Me: Yeah, but doesn’t that seem really simplified? I mean, no war ever started for just one reason.
You: I do remember learning something about government control, excessive taxes, and a lot of pretty extreme pamphlet printing.
Me: Really? That sounds interesting. I wonder what the political views of the pamphlet writers were.
You: Yeah, kinda like wondering what views the media is pushing on us.
Me: Right. Thanks! I’m going to the TWU Library now.
Doodling or Sketching

Just scribble some ideas or even check your class notes to see what you doodled about in your margins.

- What caused the fire?
- Can people ever possibly regenerate limbs like starfish?
- How does excess belly-fat effect people with diabetes?
Pre-writing Techniques

• **Twenty Questions:** Ask yourself as many questions as you can think of about your topic (here the topic is “X”)

1. How is x different from your personal experience?
2. What does x mean?
3. How is x made or done?
4. X used to be____but now is_____.
5. Where does x occur or appear?
6. What is the primary function of x?
7. Why does x occur?
8. What does x cause or influence?
9. What are the consequences of x?
10. What are the types of x?
11. How does x compare with y?
12. How is x different from your vicarious experiences?
13. How is x different from what you expected?
14. What is the present status of x?
15. What kind of person is x?
16. What is the value of x?
17. When does x occur?
18. What happens just before/ after x?
19. What is likely to be true of x in the future?
20. What case can be made for/against x?
I’m an Alien From Another Planet...

Pretend you are an alien recently arrived on Earth from another planet.

What would an alien wonder about or want to know about your topic? What would they find confusing or interesting?

(This seems silly, but it can help you look at your topic from a different perspective). Make a list of what the alien would see and its reactions and questions.
Circle Technique

The circle technique is great for helping you look past your own perspective to a broader perspective. Start with yourself and your opinion in the center and then broaden.

As an American, I realize the damage done to the South effected the economy of the entire country.

As an American, the effects of the Civil War are still felt today.

As a Northerner, the Civil War did not significantly hurt my state.

From my perspective and education as a New Yorker, I feel the Civil War was justified.
Go Back and Make Notes...

Pick up your notes, class journal, freewrite, or other writing, and make notes for yourself. Question your statements and ideas:

- Nothing big and political happens for just one reason.
- There are always things hidden beneath the surface.
- The American public is (historically) satisfied with the simplified answers.
- Slavery could have been abolished without war.
- People in power often struggle with ego.
- Absolute power corrupts...
- What about religion?
- Better ways to reach the same ends...

Prove this?

Says who?

Why not?

Examples?

Good question

Like what?

How do you know?
Writer’s Block?

If you get stuck with your prewriting or later with drafting, check out our handout or presentation for **Overcoming Writer’s Block**, or stop by The Write Site!

We are located in CFO 131, and you can call 940.898.2341 for an appointment!