

Starting Techniques

Studies of the writing process of successful experienced writers show that there are many ways and places to begin writing. Most important is simply that you begin to write. Perhaps only a small portion of your initial, tentative, writing will remain in the final paper; but this outcome is common in creative work and should not be considered problematic or an indicator of a lack of writing ability. What really matters is that you get started and become engaged in the writing process.

You can begin by writing in a general way about very simple things such as what you already know about the topic of the assignment, or why you love it, or hate it, or what you don't understand and think you need to learn more about.

Each of the following is a starting technique that experienced writers use frequently.

Aristotle's Topics

The first sentences you write may be ones that help you explore your subject. They don't have to appear verbatim in the final essay, and certainly not at the beginning of the essay. From the time of Aristotle, orators and writers have explored their subject by considering it from the point of view of several categories he suggested for this purpose. You might start by writing out definitions of the key concepts involved in your topic. You could write sentences about comparisons (similarities and differences) among the key concepts or try to explain the meaning of a concept by writing what it is similar to and/or different from. Sentences about relationships relevant to the topic are a good way to get started – for example, are there any cause and effect relationships involved. Writing sentences about the particular circumstances of the situation, people, or research to be discussed in the essay is a fairly easy way to start and can lead to making connections with important concepts relevant to the topic. Sentences that describe the evidence or the authorities you have consulted in your library research are another possibility.

Concept Mapping

Make a list of as many concepts as you can think of that are related to your topic. On a sheet of paper write down these concepts scattered all across the page and perhaps draw circles around each one. Now draw lines between the concepts that are related to each other in important ways. On the line between the concepts write a sentence, or two, explaining the connection between those two concepts. Use these sentences as starting points for paragraphs. See the Gathering & Noting Ideas module for more information on creating concept maps.

Free Writing

Brainstorming is a short period during which you turn off your evaluation mechanism and put forward whatever comes to mind, without criticism. Brainstorming can be an effective way to begin writing, and many writers use a specific strategy called *free writing*. One sets aside a short period of time, perhaps five or ten minutes, and pushes oneself to write continuously for that period. Fingers can't leave the keyboard (or the pen and paper) and one writes whatever comes to mind continuously without regard to grammar, style, organization, or even relevance. At the end of the period you read over the product, and almost inevitably you will find at least a few good ideas ready for further development. Circle these and then try a second or third period of free writing focusing on these promising points that resulted from the previous period.

Generic Sentence Completion

Some writers find it productive to begin by writing sentences to complete phrases such as the following:

I think I'm going to argue that ...

The thing I find most interesting about this topic is ...

The most surprising discovery in my library research was ...

The thing I find hard to believe about what I've read is ...

What I would really like people to understand is ...

The primary difference between the two positions is ...

What I really need (or would like) to know more about is ...

The best piece of evidence for my position is ...

The reason I care about this topic is ...

The reason I don't care about this topic is ...

The most important things for people to know about this topic are ...

Listing

Lists and point-form outlines can be useful ways to begin. Writing a sentence to explain why a particular point should be included in the essay and/or how it connects to the other points will lead to several ideas for further development in the essay.