GETTING STARTED: A TOOLBOX OF PRE-WRITING AND INVENTION STRATEGIES TO GET YOUR IDEAS FLOWING

It’s true: writing can be difficult. For some of us, getting started is the hardest part. Writers who are stuck often use pre-writing or invention techniques to help jump-start their ideas and the writing process. These are tools you can use to explore or achieve a better understanding of a topic, to figure out what you already know or need to know, and to get down ideas that will allow you to move towards the next stages of the writing process.

BEYOND “WRITER’S BLOCK”

If you think you might be suffering from writer’s block (or any similarly debilitating writing ailment), don’t despair: visit the Writing Lab, where the tutors will be happy to work with you to discuss treatment options. Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab also has an excellent handout on “Overcoming Writer’s Block,” available at owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_block.html.

WHY A “TOOLBOX”?  

For some jobs, you need a wrench; others require a screwdriver (flathead or phillips). And if you work with tools, you probably have your favorites: a trustworthy hammer or a drill you’ve had for years. We can think about strategies for invention in writing in the same way.  

This handout is designed to remind you about the writing tools you may already have in your toolbox, and introduce you to some new ones. Because writers are different and have varied preferences, not all of these methods work for all writers. We recommend that you give each tool a chance and get a sense of what works best for you: experiment. And consider that different writing situations may require different tools.

TIPS FOR GETTING IDEAS FLOWING:

Pre-writing and invention work is only one part of the writing process (the early part). Don’t expect to apply any of these techniques and end up with a finished draft. Pre-writing should be about ideas and content, not correctness:

- Don’t censor—yet.
- Don’t criticize—yet.
- Don’t edit—yet.

Allow yourself to write down obvious, ridiculous, and even “stupid” ideas. Pre-writing can get a little bit silly—and that’s fine. Sometimes the best ideas are triggered by—or even related to—the ones that seem the strangest at first.

TOOLS TO CONSIDER INCLUDING IN YOUR PRE-WRITING TOOLBOX

BRAINSTORMING

By yourself or with a group, make a list of words and phrases that relate to your topic—as many as you can in a short period of time (10 minutes is good). Just toss ideas out and write them down in whatever order they occur to you.

CLUSTERING OR MAPPING

This is a specialized form of brainstorming. First, write your topic in the middle of a blank piece of paper. Around that topic, write down words or phrases representing ideas that are related to your topic; circle each idea and connect it to your main topic with a line. Then, for each circled word or phrase, repeat this process: what other ideas are connected? Write these down too, and keep going until you run out of connections for each circle. Some parts of your cluster may have many points coming off it, while others may lead to dead ends, but in the end you’ll have a visual representation of your topic and many related ideas.

FREEWriting

A form of quick, un-careful, non-stop writing which is meant to get you thinking or writing without having to worry about the kinds of things writers worry about in more public forms of writing (sentence structure, spelling, making sense, vocabulary, sounding intelligent). To freewrite, just jot down whatever comes into your head (even if it’s “I have absolutely nothing to say”) and don’t stop (even just to write “blah blah blah” over and over)—new
ideas will almost always come up. Try **FOCUSED FREEWRITING**, too: focus on a *particular* topic or idea and write as much as you can about it.

**Peripheral writing (“Looping”)**

An extended form of freewriting, similar to dreaming, which is particularly helpful for generating new ideas and moving past “blocked” ways of understanding issues, texts, feelings. Write a topic or starting point at the top of a page and do a focused freewrite for seven minutes. After seven minutes of continuous writing, stop and take a quick look over what you have written, underlining or circling a particular word, phrase or idea that strikes you as interesting, or as something you have more to say about. Put that word/phrase at the top of another focused freewrite and repeat.

Peripheral writing is a good tool for thinking through topics that seem either boring or overwhelming. It often lets in new ideas or understandings you might not otherwise get down on paper: it releases thoughts in your “peripheral” mind and vision and allows you to look straight at them. It is most effective when done for six or more rounds—well past the point where you’ve exhausted the thoughts you have “on top.”

**Discussing: Talking and Listening**

Grab some friends, classmates, a tutor or your teacher, and talk it through. For writers who feel more comfortable (or even more creative) bouncing ideas off of others, discussion can be an important pre-writing tool. To help you remember your ideas, be sure to take notes—or even ask someone you’re speaking with to take notes about what you say.

**Questioning**


There are also some age-old questions developed by Aristotle and his followers to describe a topic: *What is it and what parts does it have that make it what it is? What caused it and what changes might have an effect on it? What other things is it like or not like? (What can you compare it to?) What is the history of your topic and what do people say about it? How does it fit into larger structures, including society / the world? Asking these questions can help you examine your topic from new perspectives.

**Letter Writing**

Sometimes it helps to direct your thoughts at a different *audience*, especially someone you know already understands where you’re coming from. Write a letter to a friend, a relative, or even a former teacher about what you’re working on. Explain the writing, the subject matter, and the expectations of the project. You can explain things you are unsure about, too.

**Dialoguing**

Dialogues are written versions of conversations, and they’re not just for plays, movies and TV. Dialogues can help you delve deeper into different and new perspectives. To write a one, simply type your name at the beginning of each statement and then pass it to someone else (or pretend you are someone else) and start a conversation—even an argument—about your topic.

Here are three different kinds of dialogue you might try:

1. **Find a partner and write back and forth**—on paper, at a computer, or over email. If you get stuck or find yourself only agreeing with each other, see if you can start a disagreement about your topic or find something about it that you and your partner don’t see eye-to-eye on. This kind of dialogue works well over email.

2. **You can also write a dialogue “with” an author or public figure you want to understand better**: invent a conversation with Shakespeare, or Zora Neale Hurston, or George W. Bush, and try to imagine how they would answer your questions about their history or their writing. Or, depending on your writing assignment, start a conversation between two historical figures or two characters in a piece of fiction: what would Bush and Thomas Jefferson have to talk about? What would Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins want to say to each other?

3. **Perhaps the person you really need to imagine a dialogue with is the person you are writing to or for**: Start an imaginary dialogue with your teacher, for example, or with other students in your class.