

Starting Your Paper

Exploring Ideas

Before writing your paper, you may need to lay some groundwork. Discovering what you want to say, and the order in which you want to say it, is an important step in the writing process. Perhaps you are overflowing with ideas about your topic, or maybe you are having trouble coming up with anything at all. Either way, there are some strategies that you can use to help narrow and/or expand ideas for your paper.

Brainstorming/Listing

Write down everything you can think of that is related to your topic. Ask questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? What ideas have you generated?

Freewriting

Write about your topic for ten minutes, recording all your thoughts no matter how silly or random. Just keep your pen or fingers moving! Look back over your writing. Underline ideas that you might use to develop your paper.

Clustering

Write your subject in the middle of the page and circle it. As you write down ideas, circle and connect them to your central circle. As more ideas come to you, connect them with the most closely related circle. Do any particular clusters give you some interesting material for your paper?

Different Perspectives

View your subject from different angles. Ask questions like these: How can I describe it? What is it like? From what is it different? What does it make people think of? Is it part of something bigger? What controversies exist? Ask other people what they think of your subject. This should stimulate your thinking.

Organizing Ideas

Now that you have some ideas, consider which ones you want to use and how you want to organize them. Important: Make sure you can state the main idea of your paper in a sentence or two. One central focus will help you connect all your thoughts.

Scratch Outline

List your main supporting ideas. Consider what might be the best order to address each point and then number them accordingly. This is a very quick, basic outline and may be enough to get you started on your first draft.

Outline Tree

This looks a lot like a family tree. Place the main idea at the top with your supporting ideas branching off. Beneath each supporting idea, you can branch off with other related details. This provides a good visual representation of how your ideas are connected to each other.

Outline Cards

Write each of your main supporting ideas on an index card and order them. Related quotes, statistics, specific details, and supporting evidence can also be written on separate cards and ordered accordingly.

Outline Worksheet/Sunburst Organizer

These worksheets offer tools for organizing your ideas with a fair amount of detail. Ask a consultant where they are if you cannot find them in the Writing Center.

The content of this handout was adapted with changes from the following source:

Clouse, Barbara Fine. *Working It Out: A Troubleshooting Guide for Writers*. McGraw Hill, 2001.

This handout was created by the Writing Centers at YVC.

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