



PREWRITING

Many writers experience difficulty when beginning an essay or other type of writing project, but there are techniques or strategies that can help with getting started.

The Usual Methods: State your thesis. Write an outline. Begin the first draft. Revise and polish.

These techniques may sound easy, but sometimes they don't yield results. Instead, try these strategies:

Think about your PURPOSE:

What is your purpose for writing about the subject?

One challenging aspect of the writing process is narrowing your choices for a topic. For example, your topic might be "the coffee on campus." At this point, you and your potential reader are asking the same question, "So what?" Why should you write about this, and why should anyone read it?

Do you want the reader to pity you because of the unbearable coffee you have to drink on campus because you don't have time between classes to walk to a Starbucks? Do you want to analyze large-scale institutional coffee production? Do you want to compare Chapman's coffee to that served at UC Irvine?

How are you going to achieve this purpose?

How, for example, would you achieve your purpose if you wanted to describe a novel as the best you've ever read? Would you define for yourself a specific means of doing so? Would your comments on the novel go beyond merely telling the reader that you really liked it?

Start with some IDEAS:

Brainstorm as many good and bad ideas, suggestions, examples, and sentences as you can. Ask others for ideas. Jot down everything that comes to mind, including material you are sure you'll throw out, and keep adding to the list as ideas continue to come to mind.

Talk to your audience, or pretend that you are being interviewed by someone. What questions would the other person ask? You might also try to think about how you would teach the subject to a group or class.

Rest and just let it all percolate.

Summarize your whole idea.

Tell it to someone in three or four sentences as if you were describing the plot of a movie you recently saw.

Outline, make a diagram, or whatever helps you to see a schematic representation of what you have. You may discover the need for more material in some places.

Try **free writing** on everything you can think of about the topic. Writing down what you already know will help you make connections and determine where you'll need to conduct further research.

Close reading a text can be helpful for sparking new ideas and making new connections within the material.

Write a first draft.

Put the draft away, if possible. Later, read it aloud to yourself or to someone else. Listen for places that need clarification or more information.

You may find yourself jumping back and forth among these various strategies. You may find that one works better than another. You may find yourself trying several strategies at once. If so, then you are probably doing something right.

Ask yourself some QUESTIONS:

Explore the problem rather than the topic: Who is your reader? What is your purpose? Who are you, the writer? (What image or persona do you want to project?)

Ask yourself Journalistic questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? So What?

Make your goals operational: How can you achieve your purpose? Can you make a plan?

Consider your audience: Talk to your reader. What questions would they ask? What different kinds of readers might you have?

**For more information on prewriting and other writing topics, visit Purdue University's Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/>