



Invention: Strategies for Tackling the Blank Page

Writing begins with invention, with bringing something to life.

The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing defines invention as "a writer's search for all the kinds of material – both in the writer's memory and in external sources – that can shape and determine what can be presented and even known" (Glenn and Goldthwaite 163). This definition emphasizes the active role of the writer in assembling relevant ideas, materials, and sources that will shape what a text can communicate.

Getting started with a new project can be exciting, but it can also be difficult—especially if you are unfamiliar with the topic. For this reason, we identify below some common situations you might find yourself in, and offer key strategies that you can try out to discover and develop ideas for your writing.

I got a new assignment, and I have no idea where to start.

Try freewriting about the topic. According to Peter Elbow, author of *Writing without Teachers* and *Writing with Power*, freewriting is a process of simply sitting down and writing for a specified period of time, without stopping:

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing.

If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. [...] The only requirement is that you never stop. (Elbow 3)

Take the technique seriously and actually set a timer for yourself and write about your topic for that amount of time. This technique is useful for overcoming writer's block, generating a lot of material, and even improving your writing over time.

I have to create an argument using multiple texts. What do I do?

Try writing a dialogue. In order to explore different, perhaps even conflicting, points of view on a topic, give voice to these perspectives and put them in conversation with one another. Maybe you yourself hold these contradictory ideas or feelings. Or perhaps your project involves different historical figures whose ideas and values clashed. Your dialogue can begin with two figures or expand into a cast of characters who each have a unique and relevant perspective. Perhaps it begins with a simple question, such as “What do you think about _____? Why?”

According to Elbow, dialogue writing is especially useful for preparing to write analysis or argument: “Get two people arguing with each other on paper—or give your opponent a voice so he can argue with you on paper—and you will naturally produce arguments: assertions, supporting reasons, and evidence” (“Power” 68).

I have to analyze a work of art—a film, play, poem, short story, novel, or painting. Help!

Try focusing on stories, scenes & portraits. What stories come to mind when you think of your topic or the work of art you need to analyze? Write down all the little anecdotes that you have in your memory. If you are analyzing a film or novel, what moments or scenes stick out in your memory as important? Describe them. What people are most important to your topic and what are their qualities? Write down a thumbnail sketch of their personality, physical bearing, and important things they did or said.

Stories, scenes, and portraits help us get away from generalizations and focus on concrete details. They help us locate emotional or psychological “centers of gravity” (Elbow, “Power” 70). Most importantly, they give us the opportunity to reflect upon and gain insight into what matters to us as readers and writers, what associations animate us, and what details we notice and why.

I have some ideas, but they feel all jumbled up and I don’t know how to organize them. What can I do?

Try mind mapping. Also called clustering or webbing, mind mapping is an invention strategy that helps you to visually identify important concepts and

connections between ideas. Write your topic in the center of a page and circle it. Create a halo of related ideas around the central hub, and draw spokes from the hub to the related ideas. Keep branching out from idea to associated idea, drawing lines of connection where you see fit.

Examine your map to see how your ideas connect with one another, and which ideas have the most connections, and are, thus, central to your project (“Prewriting Strategies”; “Invention Strategies”). As you work to translate your map into a first draft, keep in mind that the idea that you wrote down in your central hub could develop into a thesis statement, and the halo of related ideas could each develop into a paragraph, with subsequent ideas supplying evidence for that idea.

I need help keeping track of my ideas while I am doing research. I do lots of reading, but when I sit down to write, it feels disconnected.

Try keeping a reading/research journal: A reading journal allows you focused space to respond to all the materials that you might be reading for a class or a research project. In these pages, “students can wrestle with ideas, note correspondences with and differences between the reading and their own experience, and prepare for class discussions” (Glenn and Goldthwaite 172).

Experiment with using what’s called “the double-entry notebook,” where you use one side of the page to write “facts or quotations from [your] reading,” and on the other side of the page, you write down your own thoughts and reflections (ibid). The best thing about a reading journal is that it makes it easier to start writing, because you have been writing all along.

Once I have an idea, it's hard to keep my focus from one writing session to the next. What can help give me more continuity?

Try keeping a writing log: While you are working on a project, and after you finish, take time to reflect on your writing process. What is going well? What are your challenges? What were you able to accomplish in a given writing session? What are you looking forward to doing next in your writing? Use this log to keep track of your thoughts regarding a particular assignment and/or your writing process in general. Over time, this log will help you identify your strengths as a writer and areas where you may focus attention for growth (Glenn and Goldthwaite 172).

I want to better connect my experiences to my writing process as I work on new projects. What could help?

Try keeping a commonplace book: Think of the commonplace book as a smorgasbord of ideas and inspiration. You can use this journal as a combination of a reading/research journal and a more conventional journal, where you write down your own thoughts and feelings. Reflect on your “experiences, ideas, observation, and images, but also quotations from [your] reading” (Glenn and Goldthwaite 173). Use this journal to develop and keep track of your interests, inquiries, and academic obsessions that can develop into research projects, creative nonfiction pieces, or evidence-based arguments.

Works Cited

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