

Prewriting

Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.

Although getting started on a paper may seem intimidating, following these suggestions can help to make the process both effective and less overwhelming.

How to Get Started

Refer to the assignment from your instructor to determine the purpose of your paper. Ask yourself, “What is the assignment?” and “What is the purpose of my paper?” A paper can serve any number of purposes:

- to analyze
- to evaluate
- to report
- to argue
- to interpret
- to self-express
- to discuss or examine
- to persuade
- to summarize

Identify the Audience

Identify your audience and determine how the paper should be written for that audience. Ask yourself,

- **Who will read my paper?** A paper would be written very differently for a teacher than it would be for a classmate or a business.
- **What does my audience already know?** What information will I not need to explain?
- **What does my audience not already know?** Do I need to provide background information, define technical terms, or give a context for my topic?
- **What topics, details, or approaches will interest my audience?**
- **What level of language should I use?** Should I write in a formal or informal style? Should I use simple or complex words and sentences?

Determine the Tone

Your tone is your overall attitude toward the topic and reader. In determining your tone, consider the following points:

- Papers can vary dramatically in tone, but for most college papers, you should use a knowledgeable, somewhat serious tone. Avoid sounding artificial, however.
- Look at the tone of other writing in your field to help determine what tone to use.

What will I write about?

Several techniques can help you generate material.

Try Freewriting

Write down a specific topic or question, and using it as inspiration, write every word or phrase that comes to mind. Work quickly, and don’t stop writing until your ideas run out. After writing for several minutes, pick out the ideas that are the most interesting, complex, or original to develop further.

Continue to Ask Questions

Your assignment may pose some questions, but it is often useful to develop more specific or probing questions as you generate ideas. Continue questioning throughout the writing process.

Look for Patterns

Identifying patterns of repetition and contrast in a source or topic can help you find areas of emphasis, conflict, or interest. Pointing out and analyzing these patterns can comprise significant portions of some papers. See our “Conducting Research” handout for information on how to find sources.

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Narrowing a Topic

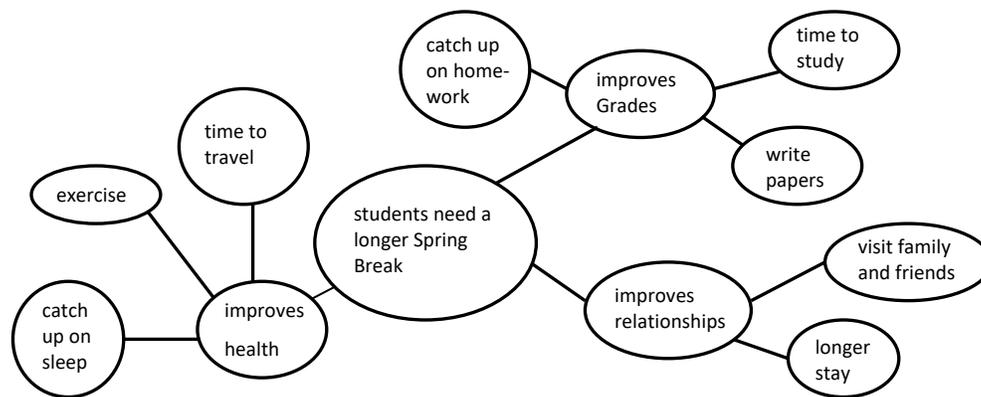
When choosing a topic, remember that it is better in the long run to choose a strong, narrow topic than a big, general topic. Larger topics such as “poverty,” can be too overwhelming. By redefining the topic to something more specific, such as “poverty in the southeastern United States amongst single-parent households,” it helps your research go smoother, rather than having to search through pages and pages of research on “poverty.” Also, if you try to tackle a larger topic, it will come off as trying to “save the whales,” meaning that you are trying to change something that is too complex to address in one paper. Take what you can handle.

Organize Your Evidence

After gathering your evidence, read through it, mark the most important pieces—quotes, facts, or analyses—and arrange it in an order you might use.

Create a Cluster Diagram

If visual mapping is useful to you, group your thoughts into categories according to their similarities:



Formulate Your Thesis

The thesis statement sets forth your main point, limits your topic, indicates your paper’s organization, and is typically found at the end of your introduction. You should continue to refine your thesis as you write, but compose a working thesis that incorporates your main claims up to this point.

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Develop an Outline

Outlines help you organize all the information you have gathered. You can simply use bullets if you like.

Title: The Importance of a Longer Spring Break

Thesis Statement: A longer spring break improves health, grades, and relationships.

I. A longer spring break improves health

A. Catch up on sleep

1. Naps
2. Sleep in
3. Rest periods

B. Exercise

1. Outdoor activities
2. Community activities
3. Time at the gym

II. A longer spring break improves grades

A. Catch up on homework

1. Read
2. Study
3. Get ahead

B. Write papers

1. Research
2. Outline
3. Rough drafts

III. A longer spring break improves relationships

A. Visit family

1. Time to travel home safely
2. Stay for longer visits
3. Time to see more family

B. Visit friends

1. Go on an outing together
2. Get together for lunch
3. Have sleepovers