



Getting Started with Writing

One of the most challenging parts of the writing process can be simply knowing where to begin! This handout will help you get started with writing by focusing on the key first steps of choosing a topic and prewriting. This guide covers strategies for narrowing down ideas, finding a focus that interests you, and generating content before writing a polished draft. You will learn about techniques like freewriting, clustering, and questioning to help you explore possible directions for your writing. This will support you in gaining a clear sense of your topic and a set of ideas you can build on to draft your piece.

Picking a Topic

The more you write research papers, the more freedom you gain over your topics. While some instructors will give you guidelines and specific topics to cover for research and paper writing, others will let you pick your own area of interest. Picking a topic from a wide variety of options and sources may seem difficult but there are ways to make it easier to dive deep into a topic. A good general principle when picking a topic for written assignments is to concentrate on a focused topic which you will cover in-depth, instead of a broad surface level idea. This worksheet will provide some tips for choosing strong topics for papers.

Common Myths About Topics

Myth #1: “The longer the paper, the broader my topic should be.”

Not at all. Typically, the longer the paper length, the more in-depth your study of the topic should be. Instead of trying to cover everything your topic encompasses, let yourself be specific and pick focused details and ideas. Use the space to expand your argument, rather than include more general information about the topic.

Myth #2: “If I have a specific topic, I won’t find enough research.”

Not necessarily. Rather than searching for a paper that covers all the same content you wish to discuss in your paper, look for research that addresses parts or aspects of your topic. Writing a paper that just repeats other works is a summary. When writing research papers, you want to draw from a variety of sources to build and defend your own arguments. This might even lead you to take a multi-disciplinary approach to get a deeper understanding of how different scholars approach the topic.

Write Before You Read

You may be surprised by how much you know about your topic before you start your research. Before you overwhelm yourself with new ideas, try to figure out what you already know about the topic. You can do this by creating an outline of your intended project. Consider it like building a hypothesis. What do you think will happen before you enter the research process? In many ways, it is like directed brainstorming. Keep the following in mind when starting an outline for ideas:

Topic:

What is the topic or subject of the paper? What do you already know about the topic?

Problem:

What is the topic's problem or issue within the topic? What can be or is being debated?

Solution/Significance:

What is a possible new perspective or solution to the problem? Why do you think this is an important issue? Do you agree with one position?

Refining Your Topic with the 4 W's

These questions will help you to refine your topic, allowing you to address how you will develop your paper and why you will develop it in particular directions.

What?

Describe the topic or key elements of the topic.

Tip: Define key terms and vocabulary.

Who?

Identify current scholars studying the topic or key stakeholders in the debate.

Tip: Does your topic address everyone or only parts of the population? Are certain groups more relevant than others?

When?

Pick a timeframe instead of trying to cover every event.

Tip: Rather than covering the entire history of a topic, focus on a particular event or turning point. This will make it more manageable to go into more depth.

Where?

Determine the geographical region for the topic.

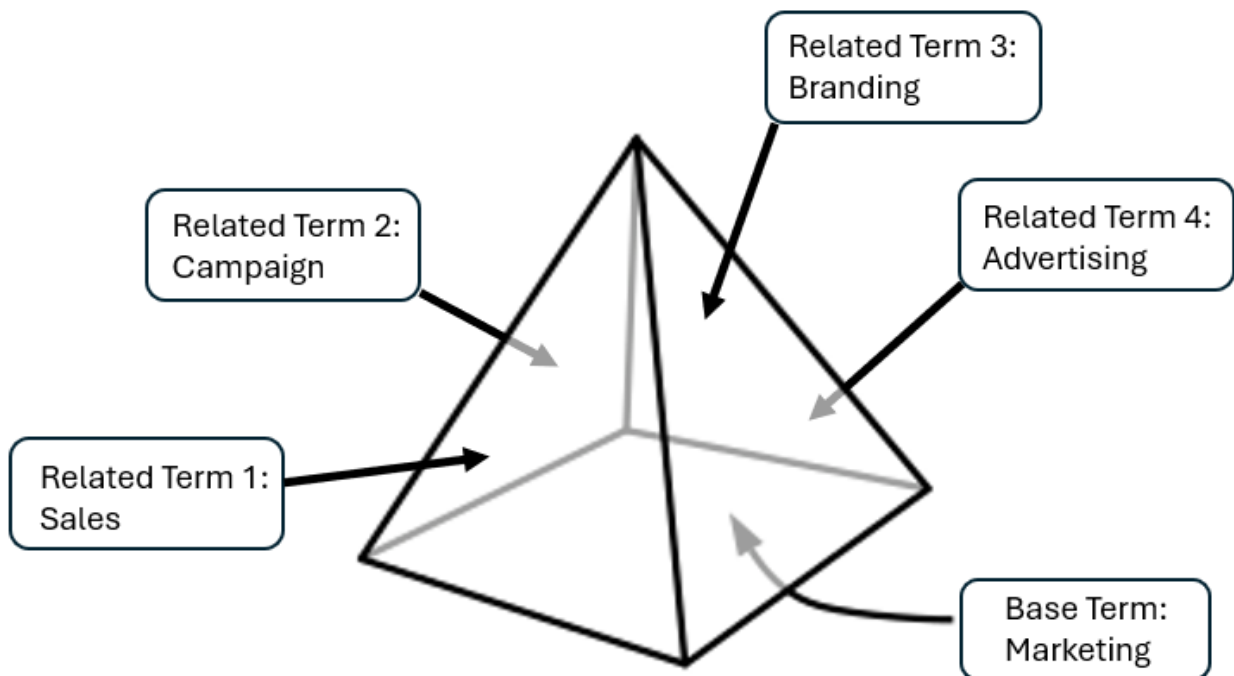
Tip: Think about breaking down larger areas into regional case studies. For instance, a paper on fishing in Canada could easily be scaled-down to become the fishing industry on the East Coast.

Building Search Terms: A Pyramid Model

Consider a square pyramid. It contains a square base and 4 triangle sides. You may find that the first word you use to describe your idea may be too specific or too general. Start with the most specific word as your base and then build a pyramid with 4 other words which include aspects of the base word. Consider repeating this exercise several times before you start to research.

Tip: You can create a “monster search” by using Boolean operators (words “and,” “or,” and “not” when searching databases). Consider using the formula below when researching:

(Search Term 1 **OR** Search Term 2 **OR** Search Term 3) **AND** (Choice 1 **OR** Choice 2 **OR** Choice 3)



Prewriting

Taking the time to think through your project is an important in the writing process that is often overlooked. Strong assignments take time to form. Set aside time for prewriting and planning to give yourself a clear outline of what your project entails. Prewriting can include freewriting, brainstorming, talking to someone about the project, or anything that gets you thinking about your writing and how all the pieces fit together. Try some of the following techniques to see how your paper fits together.

Freewriting

The process is to just write. Write anything about your topic (broad or small)! It doesn't matter whether you keep it or scrap it in the end, just write whatever comes to mind. To start, take a single word related to your topic and write it at the top of the page. Below it, write down some of the things you might like to say about the topic, or any directions you might want to take the argument in. Freewriting works best when it's timed. 10 to 15 minutes is usually all you need and prevents you from planning more than you can cover in your assignment.

Reverse outlining

After a free-writing session, or after writing a rough first draft of your paper, look at what you are trying to say and create an outline. Take key topics or points from each written paragraph and place them in a logical order of development. Analyze the outline created by this process. Look for gaps, weaknesses, or issues with order and flow of ideas. Revise your outline based on this analysis and use the final outline as the basis for your next draft.

Question-based outlines

If outlines are challenging because they require you to know all the answers, consider starting with questions. As you build your research questions, consider the relationship between them. Can you break down broad questions into a series of smaller ones? Often questions that start with "why" or "how" address sub questions like "what" "who" or "when." By working through questions and using them to organize the material, you can create a series of short-answer questions, which you can answer in any order.

Clustering

If you're still not sure how to organize your research, consider creating a table. Use the table to work through your sources and information, creating clumps of ideas.

Idea 1: Look at each source and try to answer the following questions:

- What is the author's motivation?
- How does the author approach the subject matter? What kinds of words are used?
- What is the overall structure of the author's work? How do the parts fit together?

Idea 2: Develop a chart in which you list all your sources on one side, and on the other side possible criteria or ideas you think your paper would address.