

A Short Guide to Clarifying Your Ideas:

When doing any kind of writing, having a clear idea that you wish to express is one of the most important parts of getting started. Most of the time however, when we first sit down to write this can be one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome. This guide will walk you through several techniques to help you develop a strong foundation to your paper.

■ Read the Prompt Closely:

We've all heard it a million times, but it cannot be said enough. The starting point for any paper is the prompt, and, especially if you are having trouble getting started, spending time breaking down what is being asked is key.

- Start by annotating the prompt. Highlight what you think are the most important elements of the question. If there are multiple parts, break them down and number them. Be sure to keep an eye out for small details that may have escaped your attention on the first reading.
- Take the parts of the prompt you identified and compose them into a bulleted outline. As you do this, pay attention to how the different elements relate to each other logically. Are there some that need to be addressed before others? Is there a clear way to segue between them? Think of this outline as a checklist that you can refer to throughout the writing process.
- Pay attention to your own responses to the prompt as you do this. We all have opinions, but sometimes, when confronted with something abstract like a paper, we can feel like our mind is completely blank. By breaking down the prompt and studying it closely, the idea is to give yourself something more concrete to grab onto. Registering even your gut reactions to a question can gradually morph into the basis for an argument moving forward.

■ Review Your Notes:

While hopefully you review your notes while writing every paper, it can be especially helpful when just starting and you aren't sure what to write about. Often, despite our best efforts to absorb and retain it, our memory of an author's argument can become somewhat mixed up. Getting a clear idea of the material is critical to developing a clear argument, and the best way to do that is to return to the source.

- When reviewing your notes use a highlighter to indicate which parts might be relevant to the question being asked. This will help you later when you need to use your notes when writing, but it will also help you visually identify the train of the authors argument and the relevant information.
- As you look at your notes, don't simply read over the general headings and sections to refresh your memory, pay close attention to the small details of the argument. This specific information is what is most likely to be forgotten or confused, so spending time investigating it can be more helpful than you might think.
- In a similar vein, don't skim over parts that you think you may know well, as these can also be areas where you've forgotten more than you realized. At this stage of the process, when you are trying to generate and clarify your thoughts, returning to these points you know well can be surprisingly revealing, and provide you with the inspiration to begin writing your paper.

■ Talk Over Your Ideas:

Hopefully at this point in the process you've got a few ideas bouncing around your head, but you may not feel that they are solid enough to begin your paper. Talking over your ideas is a great way of getting to the point where you feel confident about your ideas.

- Any friend, roommate, or colleague will do, as long as you feel comfortable speaking to them. They don't need to be especially knowledgeable about the topic at hand, and in fact, trying to explain yourself to someone with no background knowledge whatsoever can actually be very helpful. That said, the ideal listener is someone who will pay close attention and prompt you with questions about less clear or fuzzy portions of your argument. However, it sometimes happens that there just isn't anyone available to listen, in that case even a houseplant will do in a pinch.
- Don't feel like you have to make an organized presentation, feel free to talk about your ideas in a natural and conversational way, often we begin formatting our thoughts in the most logical way instinctively as we speak. Similarly, allow your ideas to develop and change over the course of the conversation. Your position at the end will often be very different from where you started, which is a sign that you've made progress in developing your argument.
- Keep a notebook on hand to write down any breakthroughs you make while talking. Recording with your phone or using a text to speech program can be even more helpful if you don't want to interrupt your flow. Being able to return to these breakthroughs can be extremely helpful as you move further along in the writing process.

■ WRITE:

Ultimately, at some point we do have to actually begin writing our paper and while the previous steps can help us get the best possible starting point, much of our idea generation will happen during the actual writing process itself. It's tempting to resist writing until we feel completely confident in our ideas, but, more often than not, that's not going to happen. Nevertheless, if you still feel lost, there are a few writing exercises we can do before beginning our proper first draft that can help.

- Free-writing can be a helpful tool in the same vein as conversation, allowing you to explore your ideas in a concrete way. When free-writing don't worry about coherence or logical structure so much as freely exploring your ideas. The best way to free write is to set a time for a few minutes and just write continuously from start to finish. Even if the product is mostly nonsense, the process will help you get your thoughts out there and will give you some starting material to begin writing your first draft.
- Making an outline, another thing we've all heard a million times. While outlines are undoubtedly helpful tools for creating good organization and structure in your writing, they are also an effective way to start reigning in your thoughts into something coherent. Begin by returning to any notes you have taken about the prompt, the readings, or during your conversation and start turning them into bullet points. Rather than approaching this as the unchanging blueprint for your writing, experiment with moving elements of your argument around until you get something that you feel happy with.
- The next step is simply to begin writing your first draft. Again though, don't think of your first draft as the "mostly-final" product that will only need a few small changes, think of it as a flexible way to begin developing your argument and exploring different ideas. On your first try there *will* be parts of your argument that are redundant or confusing, but this is your opportunity to get them out there on the page, where you can work with them critically.