



How to Determine a Topic

While the task can be challenging, there are methods you could try to help determine a topic for writing that will engage you. Thinking ‘outside the box,’ and using these suggested prewriting activities, may help you to determine a topic that inspires you.

Step 1: Determine what type of writing you are being asked to complete. Are you being asked to explain, argue, analyze, narrate, compare/contrast, observe, inform, etc.? Read your assignment sheet carefully and thoroughly, as you must understand the writing task that is being asked of you before you can even begin to consider potential topics.

Step 2: Next, choose one (or more) of the following strategies to help get your ideas flowing!

- **Mapping:** create a visual representation of your ideas; use arrows, circles, stars, boxes, or any other graphic design to illustrate connections among your ideas and thoughts.
- **Create Lists or Outlines:** organize your thoughts and ideas by priority. Get out a fresh sheet of paper and list what you feel is most important first, then so on and so on. Use bullet points or numerals in your outline so that your outline also functions as an organization model for your writing
- **Freewrite:** write for 5-15 minutes without stopping; keep your pen to the paper for the entire duration of time. If your mind draws a blank or you can’t think of anything to write, you can write the alphabet over and over again, or a particular word repeatedly. Try not to censor yourself during your freewrite; write exactly what comes to your mind! Do not worry about grammar, mechanics, conventions, or being politically correct in this writing. Keep focused on writing down every idea that comes to mind. The goal of freewriting is to complete NON-STOP writing; ideas WILL come eventually. When you have completed your freewriting, what ideas or possible topics are on your page? Is there anything surprising in your writing, or a potential point of conversation that you had not considered yet? If so, circle these words and/or ideas and then repeat a 5-10 minute freewrite with that topic and/or idea in mind. What new ideas are now present? What new questions do you have?
- **Look to Others for Guidance:** This includes both outside sources and people! Writing does *not* have to be a solitary activity. **Skim** through research and news reports; what is going on in the world that engages your interest? What ideas or concepts are contained in your textbook or other resources? **Engage** others (classmates, teachers, mentors, family members, etc.) in conversation about possible topics. Some of the most thought-provoking ideas arise from the interactions scholars have with one another.