**Invention Techniques: How to Determine a Topic**

Determining a topic for writing can sometimes be challenging, especially under given guidelines that may not spark your interests or creativity, or when asked to write in a genre that we are unfamiliar with. Though the writing task may seem impossible under these circumstances, **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 you feel is worthy of conversation.

**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:** Once you determine what type of writing you are being asked to complete, ***read over all the guidelines of the assignment***, ***questions posed*** in the assignment, and ***class notes.*** This investigation will ensure that you follow the requirements for the writing task.

**Step 3:** Next, **choose one (or more) of the following strategies to help get your ideas flowing**!

* ***Mapping:*** 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, listing 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
* ***Reflect on Questions:*** which topics have interested you in the past? Which topics discussed in class have intrigued you, angered you, or compelled you in some way? Which topics have challenged you? Which topics did you not quite understand that may benefit from your further exploration? What do you already know about some of these topics, and what would you like to find out? What topic do you think is worthy of sharing with an audience?
* ***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?
* ***Research/Read:*** skim through research sources 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? What are some ‘hot topic’ concerns displayed via media? What are some conversations taking place on campus? What complaints have you heard about? What positive things are taking place on campus or in your classes? Consider how your responses to all of these questions are potential topics for your writing.
* ***Engage in Conversation with Others:*** talk to your classmates, teachers, mentors, family members, etc. You do not necessarily have to talk to them about potential topics, but think about the conversations that you are having daily within your interactions with others. What are some significant topics of discussion? What topics of discussion are memorable? What incidents and/or situations have been discussed that you may have a strong opinion about? All of these topics could potentially prompt a very meaningful piece of writing.