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Starting the Writing Process

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Last edited by Karl Stolley on January 28th 2007 at 4:44PM

Summary: *Tips for how to start a writing assignment.*

1. Invention: Starting the Writing Process

Writing takes time

Find out when is the assignment due and devise a plan of action. This may seem obvious and irrelevant to the writing process, but it's not. Writing is a process, not merely a product. Even the best professional writers don't just sit down at a computer, write, and call it a day. The quality of your writing will reflect the time and forethought you put into the assignment. Plan ahead for the assignment by doing pre-writing: this will allow you to be more productive and organized when you sit down to write. Also, schedule several blocks of time to devote to your writing; then, you can walk away from it for a while and come back later to make changes and revisions with a fresh mind.

Use the rhetorical elements as a guide to think through your writing

Thinking about your assignment in terms of the rhetorical situation can help guide you in the beginning of the writing process. Topic, audience, genre, style, opportunity, research, the writer, and purpose are just a few elements that make up the rhetorical situation.

Topic and audience are often very intertwined and work to inform each other. Start with a broad view of your topic such as skateboarding, pollution, or the novel *Jane Eyre* and then try to focus or refine your topic into a concise thesis statement by

thinking about your audience. Here are some questions you can ask yourself about audience:

- Who is the audience for your writing?
- Do you think your audience is interested in the topic? Why or why not?
- Why should your audience be interested in this topic?
- What does your audience already know about this topic?
- What does your audience need to know about this topic?
- What experiences has your audience had that would influence them on this topic?
- What do you hope the audience will gain from your text?

For example, imagine that your broad topic is dorm food. Who is your audience? You could be writing to current students, prospective students, parents of students, university administrators, or nutrition experts among others. Each of these groups would have different experiences with and interests in the topic of dorm food. While students might be more concerned with the taste of the food or the hours food is available parents might be more concerned with the price.

You can also think about opportunity as a way to refine or focus your topic by asking yourself what current events make your topic relevant at this moment. For example, you could connect the nutritional value of dorm food to the current debate about the obesity epidemic or you could connect the price value of dorm food to the rising cost of a college education overall.

Keep in mind the purpose of the writing assignment.

Writing can have many different purposes. Here are just a few examples:

- **Summarizing:** Presenting the main points or essence of another text in a condensed form
- **Arguing/Persuading:** Expressing a viewpoint on an issue or topic in an effort to convince others that your viewpoint is correct
- **Narrating:** Telling a story or giving an account of events
- **Evaluating:** Examining something in order to determine its value or worth based on a set of criteria.
- **Analyzing:** Breaking a topic down into its component parts in order to examine the relationships between the parts.
- **Responding:** Writing that is in a direct dialogue with another text.
- **Examining/Investigating:** Systematically questioning a topic to discover or uncover facts that are not widely known or accepted, in a way that strives to be as neutral and objective as possible.

- **Observing:** Helping the reader see and understand a person, place, object, image or event that you have directly watched or experienced through detailed sensory descriptions.

You could be observing your dorm cafeteria to see what types of food students are actually eating, you could be evaluating the quality of the food based on freshness and quantity, or you could be narrating a story about how you gained fifteen pounds your first year at college.

You may need to use several of these writing strategies within your paper. For example you could summarize federal nutrition guidelines, evaluate whether the food being served at the dorm fits those guidelines, and then argue that changes should be made in the menus to better fit those guidelines.

Pre-writing strategies

Once you have thesis statement just start writing! Don't feel constrained by format issues. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or writing in complete sentences. Brainstorm and write down everything you can think of that might relate to the thesis and then reread and evaluate the ideas you generated. It's easier to cut out bad ideas than to only think of good ones. Once you have a handful of useful ways to approach thesis you can use a basic outline structure to begin to think about organization. Remember to be flexible; this is just a way to get you writing. If better ideas occur to you as you're writing, don't be afraid to refine your original ideas.