Getting Started on your Paper

The Center

Getting started on your paper may be the hardest part of the writing process! There are four essential aspects that should help you get started: assignment comprehension, invention, thesis statements, and outlines. Get out your latest writing assignment (or use your imaginative powers) and follow along!

Understanding your assignment

The wording of an assignment will help you understand the type [or genre] of paper you are writing. For college writing, some useful words to look for [or LISTEN FOR in class, if you don’t have an assignment sheet] are:

- Summarize: To summarize means to briefly state a work’s main ideas in your own words. When you summarize, you do not share your own views.
- Analyze: To analyze means to break apart and examine essential elements (for instance, of a literary work).
- Synthesize: To synthesize means to bring together or combine.
- Persuade: To persuade means to convince others to believe through reasoning and logic.

Here are other questions to get you started:

- What class am I in? (No, seriously! Certain types of papers are written in certain classes.)
- Who is my audience? (Are you writing to your instructor – oh, no! she already knows everything.)
- Do I need sources? (Do you need to – bummer – actually do research?!)  

Now, reread your assignment. Identify some of the useful words above! What is the assignment asking you to do? What type of paper are you supposed to write?

Invention

You may need some strategies to find a topic on your own or even if a topic is assigned (not even WC tutors can think up cool stuff all the time)! Here are some common invention strategies to help:
**Listing:** Listing is exactly what it sounds like – duh! To try this strategy, list possible paper topics and then identify which have the most promise by using your brain (or a writing center tutor’s brain!).

**Freewriting:** Freewriting means to write without stopping and worrying about grammar and mechanics – woohoo! To try this strategy, set aside 10 minutes and write whatever comes to mind. Even if you veer off in a weird direction, just keep writing!

**Clustering:** Clustering can help you show the relationships between your ideas. To cluster old-school style, all you need is a pencil and paper. To try this strategy, write your potential topic in the center and draw a circle around it. Connect related ideas with circles and lines. Here is a very easy-cheesy cluster to write a paper comparing dogs and cats (see, WC tutors’ powers of imagination only go so far…😊)

**Questioning:** Asking questions can help you get your initial ideas down on paper. Journalists, for instance, ask the 6 W’s when they start a story: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How (yes, the last one isn’t a W – weird, huh)?

Now, try several of the invention strategies above. Find the ones that work best for you (I am a freewriter, but Jared is a cluster-er…did we just make up some new words?)

**Thesis statements**

An effective thesis statement presents the main idea of a paper. Every paragraph, sentence, and word in your paper must relate to this controlling idea. Think of your paper as a human body, and your thesis statement as the spinal cord. Without it, there is no structure. [What – you haven’t taken anatomy?]

The thesis statement in a five-paragraph paper usually has three main subtopics (you may have heard of the “three-point thesis statement”). An example of a thesis statement with three subtopics is:

> The new Writing Center at Tarrant County College South Campus is the best one in the country because of the cozy environment, the cutting edge grammar-based software, and the friendly, hardworking tutors.

Now, consider your assignment. Work on your thesis using the three-point thesis statement example.
Outlining

Outlining is an essential skill to help you organize your paper. Some instructors require a formal outline while others require something less formal.

Formal Outlines

Formal outlines follow a specific format and use the alphanumerical numbering system (Roman numerals, capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lowercase letters). You should also consider these four aspects:

- **Parallelism**: Headings and subheadings should be parallel in terms of parts of speech.
- **Coordination**: Information in all headings should be of the same significance.
- **Subordination**: Headings should be broad, while subheadings should be more specific.
- **Division**: Each heading should be divided into at least two parts.

Here is an example of one level of a formal, full-sentence outline working from the thesis statement above:

1. The Writing Center provides a comfortable environment.
   A. The WC has a cozy atmosphere.
      1. The temperature is always 75 degrees Fahrenheit.
      2. It smells like cookies and rainbows.
   B. The WC provides a variety of seating options.

2. The Writing Center has cutting edge grammar-based software.

Now, try making an outline for your current paper...you can do it! **General advice from the WC tutors:** Coming up with a “Getting Started” routine will help you each time you write. And if you think up stuff that isn't here, let us know in the Writing Center!