

## Inventing and Developing Ideas

1. **CHOOSE A TOPIC.** Do this at least several days before you need to in order to flesh out your ideas. Your subconscious mind will consider the topic as you do other things.

If you can choose your own topic...

- Pick something that interests you
- Choose something you know about. Think about your own areas of special knowledge - activities, skills, attitudes, problems, and unique or typical experiences.
- What doesn't interest you is unlikely to engage a reader, but your firsthand experience can make your topic vivid and convincing.
- If your paper is supposed to deal with an assigned text or texts, either note your ideas and underline text as you read in the book (if it's yours), stick post-it notes with your comments on the book pages, or take notes on a separate sheet of paper or index cards, with page numbers referring back to the text.

If your instructor assigns the topic...

- Be sure you understand it. If you have questions, get clarification, preferably from the instructor, or a T.A., or another student in the class.
- If you're not interested in the topic, choose an angle or position on the topic that you have experience with and that personally intrigues you. For example, if you are interested in cars, and your professor assigns a paper on male/female relations, you might discuss the tensions that arise between you and your girlfriend when you spend a lot of time working on your car.

2. **NARROW YOUR TOPIC.** Write about something limited enough in scope that you can be detailed about it in the space you have. While this activity will not provide the focus of your paper, because no question has yet been asked about the topic, the process of breaking large subject areas into small ones may bring these questions to mind. For example, narrow your topic...

- from Charles Dickens' novels
  - o to *Oliver Twist*
  - o to characters in *Oliver Twist*
  - o to female characters in *Oliver Twist*
  - o to positive and negative representations of female characters in *Oliver Twist*
  - o to the positive representation of mothering qualities in female characters in *Oliver Twist*

### 3. GENERATE/COLLECT IDEAS

#### **Freewriting**

You can use this method whether or not you have a topic in mind. Your goal is to write without stopping for a set period of time (say ten to fifteen minutes) and relax, letting your ideas flow. If you get stuck, you can repeat a key word from the previous sentence and build the next sentence around it. When you're finished, underline any ideas you think you can use. If you wish, you can use a second freewriting session either to develop these ideas or acquire new ones.

### **Brainstorming**

Take a piece of paper and jot down any ideas about your topic that come to mind. You don't have to write in complete sentences; you can scatter single words, phrases or questions anywhere on the page. Feel free to draw arrows, make boxes or star your material. The main point is to get as many ideas as possible on the page. If you can get a friend or classmate to do this with you it can help generate even more ideas.

### **Clustering**

Start by writing your topic in the center of a piece of paper and circle it. Then draw lines from this balloon, note any ideas which spring to mind and balloon them. Continue jotting down your ideas, following any direction you wish, but making sure your notes become more specific as you ray out from the center. You may end up using only one cluster of ideas in your paper, or several. This can be especially useful for classificatory type essays.

### **Topic Questions**

Often used by journalists to develop their news stories, these questions can help you originate ideas about your topic (you can find the same questions on page 36 of the St. Martin's Handbook).

- o Who is doing it?
- o What is at issue?
- o When does it begin and end?
- o Where is it taking place?
- o Why does it occur?
- o How is it done?

### **Comparison/Contrast Grid**

This can be particularly useful when you are asked to write about the similarities and differences between two things. Take a piece of paper and draw one vertical line down the center. First, think of all the ways the two things are similar and jot them in the left column (again, don't worry about writing complete sentences). Then on the right note all the differences. You may use the ideas on just one or both sides of the paper for your essay.

### **Pros and Cons Grid**

List on one side the pros of an issue, for example, and on the other the cons. The point is to generate and then capture your ideas, and to provide a visual representation of your potential argument.