Focused Prewriting

When your teacher first hands you an assignment, you might feel overwhelmed by the task ahead of you. You can often make those thousand dizzying possibilities swirling in your head seem more manageable by simply doing a little prewriting. Setting pen to paper in a relaxed, open-ended prewriting session will ground your "brain storm" and get you started on the writing process, bringing you closer to drafting, revising, and completion. Try using the suggestions below to rein in an overwhelming assignment and elaborate your ideas in a focused way.

1. **Look carefully at your assignment to determine its criteria.**
   Carefully read through the assignment instructions while outlining or diagramming all requirements and expectations. Must you use certain texts? How many sources—and what kind of sources—must you include? Look for action words; for example, are you required to "interview" people; to "observe" a certain location; to "summarize," "analyze," "synthesize," "compare," or "evaluate" source texts; to "define" certain key terms; to "reflect" on your experiences; to "relate" a text to course materials; or to "propose" three possible solutions to your problem? Does the assignment expect you to organize your material into specific sections? Will completing this assignment require various stages, like collecting data, visiting research sites, or designing graphics? Sometimes an assignment will have certain *requirements*, like you *must* visit two (2) different locations or *must* use at least four (4) scholarly sources. Other times an assignment prompt will include *suggestions*, like questions that you *could* consider. In your outline or diagram, be sure to emphasize all demanded requirements.

   You will next brainstorm ways to fulfill each of those demands. If your assignment is very specific about which texts or topics must be covered, your brainstorming should only touch on issues that are permitted. You don't want to waste ten minutes brainstorming about a great idea that you won't be able to use because of limitations in the assignment itself. If you are uncertain about what is expected or acceptable, now is the time to reach out to your professor or consult a writing tutor.

2. **Set a time limit for yourself.**
   We recommend a limit of 7 - 15 minutes. Stick to this time limit. Minimize distractions and interruptions. Make yourself work for the entire time. When time is up, walk away for a while to give your brain a rest.

3. **Write down everything you find interesting about your topic—don't stop writing!**
   Ask yourself what specifically interests you about this topic? What questions or concerns are at stake? Why is your topic/concern/problem important? If your mind goes blank, just write "blank blank blank" or repeat the last word over and over. Eventually, a new idea will kick in.

4. **Don't censor yourself, no matter how weird, ungrammatical, misspelled, or impossible your ideas may seem.**
   Don't change anything. Don't stop to correct mistakes. This is for you only; nobody will see or care if your handwriting is sloppy or you've written incomplete sentences. You will have plenty of time later to refine these ideas. Right now, your only goal is to figure out what interests you about your topic.

5. **Start thinking about argument.**
   After time is up and you've given yourself a break, return to your brainstormed ideas. Ask yourself if the ideas have anything in common. Do they add up to a coherent argument? Is there anything you could add, change, or combine to make this early argument more cohesive?

6. **Start thinking about using texts.**
   If your assignment requires you to use one or more texts to craft your argument, spend some time revisiting those texts. Now that you have a more solid idea of what you're going to do with these texts, new details and connections within them may become apparent to you. If you realize that what you thought was in the text isn't actually there, however, be prepared to fine-tune your thinking. You must rely on what is actually in the texts, but just because you were mistaken doesn't necessarily mean you have to start over. Perhaps your mistaken assumption reveals some meaningful insight into how people think about your topic.

7. **Start thinking about audience.**
   Who is the audience for this paper? (We know, we know: your teacher. What other potential audiences can you imagine, though? Future colleagues? Voters? Magazine subscribers? Investors?)
   Why will they be reading your paper, and what will they be hoping to get from it? What information and what writing qualities will most help them to achieve that goal? (Conciseness? Clarity? Creativity? Thoroughness? Specificity? Sincerity? Emotion?) What information and what writing qualities will be distracting or irrelevant for them?
   Is there anything else this audience needs to know for these ideas to make sense? What can you safely assume your audience already knows?
   Remember, we have certain goals as writers—to be impressive, to prove that we know a lot about the subject, to mention things we find interesting—but pursuing those goals may sometimes interfere with what our readers' needs are.

8. **Start thinking about organization.**
   Once you've figured out a working argument and identified a tentative audience, think about organization as a way to connect the two. In what order should your ideas be presented to your audience in order to convince them that your argument has merit? How can you best present a compelling case? Remember, you are still early in the process, so if you want to move ideas around later on, you can.