How to Start a Paper

Clustering: Organized Brainstorming
Clustering is a type of prewriting that lets you explore many ideas as soon as they come to you. It’s like brainstorming or free associating, and allows you to begin writing without having to know everything at once.

Step 1: Create Cluster

1. Choose a word that is central to your assignment (e.g. if you’re writing about the value of a college education, you might start with the word “expectations” in the center of the page)
2. Circle that word, then write words all around it, any that occur to you related to that chosen word
3. Write down all the words that come to you, even if they seem random, and write quickly
4. Connect your new words to previous ones with lines
5. When you have exhausted a particular avenue of associations or connections between words, go back to the central word and start again

Here’s what a cluster might look like:
Step 2: Start Writing

Write your answers to the following questions here or on a separate sheet of paper and use them as a checklist for drafting your paper:

- What question(s) must I answer in order to fulfill the assignment?

- What “code words” does my assignment contain? (These could be abstract terms like “system of belief” or they could be terms that demand a certain task of you, such as “analyze,” “compare,” “explore reasons for,” etc.)

- Which areas of my readings or sources are still unclear to me? How necessary are they for writing a first draft?

- Who is the audience for this paper? What are the most important things that my audience needs to know?

- What are a few main points that I want to convey in this paper?

- Are any of these points contradictory or overly vague? Are they too broad?

- Can I refine any of these goals or points?

- Can I support my main ideas?
3 Steps to Better Writing

1. **Prewrite for ideas (70% of time spent)**
   (This includes preparing to write by reading assigned work and doing other research)
   - Freewriting is a good starting point and one way to deal with writer’s block. Don’t worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Write for at least five to seven minutes.
   - Create clusters (see: “How to Start a Paper” handout)
   - Find a topic.
     - Is it appropriate? Too narrow? Too broad? Test your topic by completing the following sentence: “The purpose of this paper is to convince my instructor that….” If the completed sentence is clear and the task is doable, the topic is probably right.
   - This is a time to compare ideas and question things that seem illogical.

2. **Writing for organization (20% of time spent)**
   - Write in larger chunks, building your paper around your topic, and putting things in a suitable order.
   - Pay attention to the flow of ideas from one sentence to another and from one paragraph to the next.
   - Put your first draft away for a couple of days and then read it. Does it say what you want it to say? Are the ideas organized? What changes do you need to make?

3. **Rewriting for polish (10% of time spent)**
   - Read again and correct: replace past tense verbs with strong active verbs
     - Or at least, be consistent in your verb tense
   - Add smoother transitions: use words and phrases to show relationships between sentences
   - Delete wordy sentences or paragraphs that add nothing
   - Vary the structure and length of your sentences
   - Double-check spelling and grammar
   - Continue to revise until you’re satisfied
   - Have a second reader take a look and give suggestions
Revision Checklist

Step 1: Check Organization
__Is there an introduction?
__Does it have a thesis statement that gives direction about what’s to come?
__Do my paragraphs proceed logically from one to the next?
__Are there topic sentences to transition from one paragraph to the next?
__Do my paragraphs follow a specific pattern (e.g., chronological, least important to most important)?
__Does each paragraph relate directly to my thesis?
__Can any paragraphs be combined?
__Is there a concluding statement that is appropriate to the thesis?

Step 2: Check Material
__Is my support adequate?
__Is enough information given so that my reader will understand clearly?
__Is any material unnecessary or inappropriate for the thesis?
__Have I repeated any information?
__Is the material accurate?

Step 3: Check Expression
__Have I been concise? If not, refer to suggestions given in class.
__Can I eliminate any conversational or colloquial phrases? ex: “blind as a bat”
__Have I chosen specific words?
__Have I experimented with new vocabulary?
__Have I used vague terms like “thing” or “big”?
__Have I deleted terms like “so” and “very”?
__Have I varied the length of my sentences?
__When referring to a literary piece (article, book, essay, report) or an author’s opinion, have I used the present tense?

Step 4: Check Final Items
__Have I credited my sources and referred to each within my paragraphs?
__Have I used the correct bibliographical form?
__Have I numbered the pages?
__Have I used correct punctuation AND had someone proof read for me?
Writing a Term Paper

Three things instructors look for in a term paper
1. Demonstration of originality and effort
2. Demonstration that learning took place
3. Neatness, correctness, and appearance of the presentation

Phases of writing a term paper
1. Pick a topic (45 days in advance)
   - Set a deadline for picking a topic
   - Pick a topic important to the instructor and interesting to you
   - Check with your instructor—Is it important enough? Is the scope about right?
2. Do initial research and develop a preliminary outline (30-45 days in advance)
3. Do your research—Use the library (20-30 days in advance)
4. Sort your notes, revise the outline, and write a first draft (15-20 days in advance)
   - Sort information cards
   - Revise the outline—as you rework the outline, write answers to the questions you have listed
   - Write a thesis statement and a working title (A thesis statement is a concise sentence that defines the purpose of your paper. A working title is a tentative title for your paper.)
   - Write a first draft—Get your ideas down on paper
      a. Write the middle following the outline
      b. Write the beginning
      c. Write the end—do not include new facts or examples. The end should provide the general answer or answers to the main question or questions raised in the beginning of the paper.
5. Revise and proofread your paper while employing critical thinking (7-15 days in advance)
   - Read the paper aloud or get someone else to read it
   - Delete irrelevant material
   - Write transitions and do any reorganizing
   - Do fine tuning and polishing
      i. Write the middle following the outline
      ii. Write the beginning
      iii. Have a thesis statement in introduction
      iv. Guide the reader—by introducing each change in topic and connecting topics with transitions
      v. Present supporting data with examples, quotations, and data
      vi. Check grammar and spelling (with your brain in addition to your computer)