



Generating and Organizing Ideas

Imagine trying to build a house without drawing up any plans beforehand or going into the playoffs without a team strategy, just to “see what happens.” Success would depend on luck, not design. The same is true for writing. For almost any formal project—in college, for a civic group, or on the job—you need to generate ideas and “rough out” a structure before you really get started. **Planning** before you write a full draft—often called **prewriting**—gives you a map of where you want to go in your writing.

2a Generating ideas

Whatever your writing task, you will want to ask, “What do I know about what I’m writing? What else do I need to know?” Gather ideas from your existing resources—your journal or notebook entries, readings annotated with your responses, class or meeting notes, your assignment sheet or job description, and any similar projects. (See also 3a.)

Freewrite. Write by hand or at the computer for five or ten minutes *without stopping*, even if you only repeat “I’m stuck.” As such empty prose bores you, you’ll slip into more engaging ideas. Or begin **focused freewriting** with an idea—“I guess I support antigambling laws”—to start exploring it.

List. Lists can help draw out your own knowledge, make associations, and generalize from details. For her history paper on Cold War Soviet espionage, Annie Hanson listed her main points and some key supporting details.

1. Cold War background (Yalta to Berlin Wall)
2. Western vs. Soviet technology
3. Role of KGB training operatives and recruiting
4. Espionage examples (Fuchs, De Groot, Philby)

Write your topic at the top of a page, and then list ten thoughts, facts, impressions, ideas, or specifics about it. For example, begin with a general idea or a major part of your project, and list supporting details and new associations. Repeat the process with your other ideas or parts.

Ask strategic questions. Strategic questioning can pull information from your memory and direct you to other ideas to pursue. Begin with *what*, *why*, and *why not*. Ask *who*, *where*, *when*, and *how*, if they apply. Continue to

question as you probe more deeply. Brian Corby asked questions as he began his letter to the zoning board opposing a high-rise apartment next to a park.

- What?*
- Proposed high-rise apt.—18 stories, 102 units
 - East side of Piedmont Park by Sunrise Ave.
 - Planning by Feb., groundbreaking by June, done in a year
- Why?*
- Developers profit
 - Provides medium-cost housing in growing area
 - Develops ugly vacant lot by park
- Why Not?*
- “Cittifies” one of the few green patches in town
 - Traffic, crime rate, park use
 - New zoning opens the door to other high-rises

ESL ADVICE: CLEAR AND FORCEFUL DETAILS

Most writing in English tends to be direct, not abstract. Especially in the academic and work communities, a writer often makes a clear assertion about a topic, a problem, or an event. Then the writer supports that idea with facts, details, or research to “prove” the point. Readers won’t accept it on faith or the writer’s authority. If readers find your writing broad, indirect, or poorly supported, compare their expectations with those of readers in your first language. American teachers and workplace supervisors generally want writers to ask questions about projects and are accustomed to explaining what they expect.

2b Organizing ideas and information

Ideas and information will get you started, but most writing projects require **structure**—a pattern, outline, or plan to shape and organize. Use a structure readers expect in projects such as reports, or create one from your ideas.

Clusters. Draw a cluster by circling a concept, idea, or topic in the center of a page. Then jot down associations with this kernel topic, circling and connecting them with lines to the center, like the spokes of a wheel, or to each other. To create clusters in cycles, use each subsidiary idea as a new kernel topic. Marianne Kidd used clustering to begin her researched argument paper about censoring music lyrics. (See Figure 2.1 on p. 8.)

Tree diagrams. A tree diagram resembles a cluster but is more linear and hierarchical. Make your topic the trunk. Create main branches for central points and smaller branches for related ideas. Then “revise” your diagram into a working plan or outline for your project. Each main branch of Bill