



Generating Ideas and Text **22**

All good writing revolves around ideas. Whether you're writing a job-application letter, a sonnet, or an essay, you'll always spend time and effort generating ideas. Some writers can come up with a topic, put their thoughts in order, and flesh out their arguments in their heads, but most of us need to write down our ideas, play with them, tease them out, and examine them from some distance and from multiple perspectives. This chapter offers activities that can help you do just that. *Freewriting*, *looping*, *listing*, and *clustering* can help you explore what you know about a subject; *cubing* and *questioning* nudge you to consider a subject in new ways; and *outlining*, *letterwriting*, and *discovery drafting* offer ways to generate a text.

Freewriting

An informal method of exploring a subject by writing about it, freewriting (“writing freely”) can help you generate ideas and come up with materials for your draft. Here’s how to do it:

1. Write as quickly as you can without stopping for 5–10 minutes (or until you fill a page or screen).
2. If you have a subject to explore, write it at the top of the page and then start writing, but if you stray, don’t worry—just keep writing. If you don’t have a subject yet, just start writing and don’t stop until the time is up. If you can’t think of anything to say, write that (“I can’t think of anything to say”) again and again until you do—and you will!
3. Once the time is up, read over what you’ve written, and underline passages that interest you.



4. Then write some more, starting with one of those underlined passages as your new topic. Repeat the process until you've come up with a usable topic.

Looping

Looping is a more focused version of freewriting; it can help you to explore what you know about a subject. You stop, reflect on what you've written, and then write again, developing your understanding in the process. It's good for clarifying your knowledge of a subject and finding a focus. Here's what you do:

1. Write for 5–10 minutes, jotting down whatever you know about your subject. This is your first loop.
2. Read over what you wrote, and then write a single sentence summarizing the most important or interesting idea. You might try completing one of these sentences: "I guess what I was trying to say was . . ." or "What surprises me most in reading what I wrote is . . ." This will be the start of another loop.
3. Write again for 5–10 minutes, using your summary sentence as your beginning and your focus. Again, read what you've written, and then write a sentence capturing the most important idea—in a third loop.

Keep going until you have enough understanding of your topic to be able to decide on a tentative focus—something you can write about.

Listing

Some writers find it useful to keep lists of ideas that occur to them while they are thinking about a topic. Follow these steps:

1. Write a list of potential topics, leaving space to add ideas that might occur to you later. Don't try to limit your list—include anything that interests you.
2. Look for relationships among the items on your list: what patterns do you see?

■
rhetorical
situations

▲
genres

○
processes

◆
strategies

●
research
mla/apa

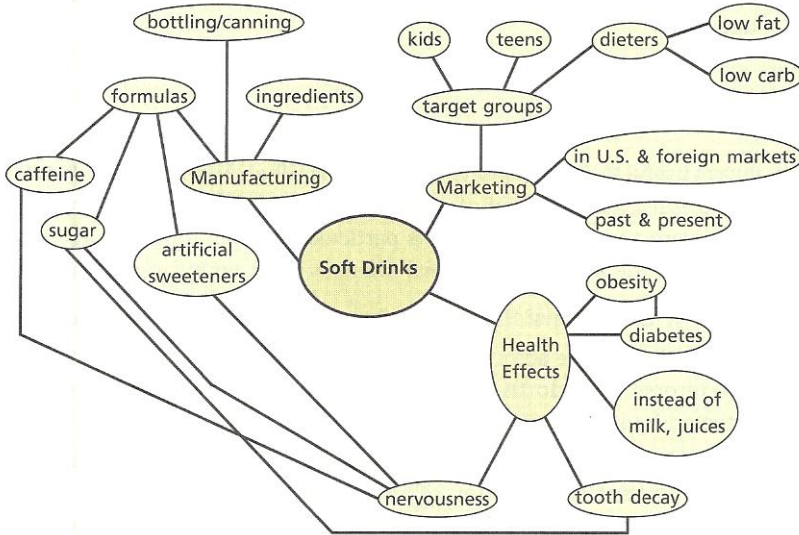
■
media/
design

3. Finally, arrange the items in an order that makes sense for your purpose and can serve as the beginning of an outline for your writing.

Clustering

Clustering is a way of generating and connecting ideas visually. It's useful for seeing how various ideas relate to one another and for developing subtopics. The technique is simple:

1. Write your topic in the middle of a sheet of paper and circle it.
2. Write ideas relating to that topic around it, circle them, and connect them to the central circle.
3. Write down ideas, examples, facts, or other details relating to each idea, and join them to the appropriate circles.
4. Keep going until you can't think of anything else relating to your topic.





You should end up with various ideas about your topic, and the clusters will allow you to see how they relate. Here's an example of a cluster on the topic of "soft drinks." Note how some ideas link not only to the main topic or related topics but also to other ideas.

Cubing

A cube has six sides. You can examine a topic as you might a cube, looking at it in these six ways:

285-93



- **DESCRIBE** it. What's its color? shape? age? size? What's it made of?

266-74



- **COMPARE** it to something else. What is it similar to or different from?

260-65



- Associate it with other things. What does it remind you of? What connections does it have to other things? How would you **CLASSIFY** it?

255-59



- **ANALYZE** it. How is it made? Where did it come from? Where is it going? How are its parts related?

- Apply it. What is it used for? What can be done with it?

82-106



- **ARGUE** for or against it. Choose a position relating to your subject, and defend it.

Questioning

It's always useful to ask questions, starting with What? Who? When? Where? How? and Why? One method of exploring a topic is asking questions as if the topic were a play. This method is particularly useful for exploring literature, history, the arts, and the social sciences. Start with these questions:


- *What?* What happens? How is it similar to or different from other actions?
- *Who?* Who are the actors? Who are the participants, and who are the spectators? How do the actors affect the action, and how are they affected by it?
- *When?* When does the action take place? How often does it happen? What happens before, after, or at the same time? Would it be different at another time? Does the time have historical significance?




rhetorical
situations




genres



processes



strategies



research
mla/apa



media/
design



- **Where?** What is the setting? What is the situation, and what makes it significant?
- **Why?** Why did this happen? What are the actors' motives? What end does the action serve?
- **How?** How does the action occur? What are the steps in the process? What techniques are required? What equipment is needed?

Outlining

You may create an *informal outline* by simply listing your ideas and numbering them in the order in which you want to write about them. You might prefer to make a *working outline*, to show the hierarchy of relationships among your ideas. While still informal, a working outline distinguishes your main ideas and your support, often through simple indentation:

First main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

Second main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

A *formal outline* shows the hierarchy of your ideas through a system of indenting, numbering, and lettering. Remember that when you divide a point into more specific subpoints, you should have at least two of them—you can't divide something into only one part. Also, try to keep items at each level parallel in structure. Formal outlines work this way:

Thesis statement

I. First reason

A. Supporting evidence

1. Detail of evidence

2. Detail of evidence

B. Supporting evidence

II. Another reason



Writing out a formal outline can be helpful when you're dealing with a complex subject; as you revise your drafts, though, be flexible and ready to change your outline as your understanding of your topic develops.

Letter Writing

Sometimes the prospect of writing a report or essay can be intimidating. You may find that explaining your topic to someone will help you get started. In that case, write a letter to someone you know—your best friend, a parent or grandparent, a sibling—in which you discuss your subject. Explain it in terms that your reader can understand. Use the unsent letter to rehearse your topic; make it a kind of rough draft that you can then revise and develop to suit your actual audience.

Discovery Drafting


Some writers do best by jumping in and writing. Here are the steps to take if you're ready to write a preliminary **DRAFT**:

1. Write your draft quickly, in one sitting if possible.
2. Assume that you are writing to discover what you want to say and how you need to say it—and that you will make substantial revisions in a later part of the process.
3. Don't worry about grammatical or factual correctness—if you can't think of a word, leave a blank to fill in later. If you're unsure of a date or spelling, put a question mark in parentheses as a reminder to check it later. Just write.


205-07


19-192


See also each of the **GENRE** chapters for specific strategies for generating text in each genre.

 rhetorical
situations

 genres

 processes

 strategies

 research
mla/apa

 media/
design