



Looping

Spend ten minutes freewriting about your subject: gathering ideas, questions, insights and connections. Afterwards, highlight the most interesting insight in your writing. Now write ten more minutes about **just that topic**, exploring it more deeply. Highlight your most interesting idea from your new writing and repeat the process 3-5 times, with each "loop" exploring a more narrow topic.



Talk It Out

Use the voice dictation app on your phone and talk about your topic continuously for **thirty minutes**. Thirty minutes is a long time and you will feel ridiculous, *but*: after 10-15 minutes you'll have said all the ideas you know you had, and after that, in order to keep talking, you'll be forced to start coming up with ideas you wouldn't have believed that you could think of!



Mind Map

Use a site like Coggle to create a mind map: A visual depiction of your topic, divided up into sub-topics. Start with the biggest ideas about your topic and, to each category, add questions, observations, evidence, counter-arguments and other insights. Challenge yourself to make a map with 80-100 individual nodes!

why pre-write?

If we imagine that the quality of our ideas follows a bell curve distribution, then for every 20 ideas we have, we would predict: 1 awful, 4 not great, 10 decent, 4 pretty good, and 1 brilliant idea.

If an essay requires 20 thoughts' worth of writing, and we only come up with 20 ideas, our essay will follow that distribution. If we pre-write and come up with 100 ideas, then we can be selective: We're likely to come up with 50 decent ideas, 20 pretty good ones, and 5 brilliant ones. So we'll use our 5 brilliant ideas, 15 of our pretty good ones, and write a much better essay!

Is this explanation literally true? Of course not. It's a metaphorical simplification. But the idea behind it is true: Pre-writing allows you to generate an incredible number of ideas, and the more ideas you have, the more picky you can be about which of those ideas make their way into your essay. Plus, it's easier to reject ideas in brainstorm form than it is to throw them away after you've spent hours putting them in perfectly crafting sentences!



Debate Yourself



Genre Swap

Un-stick your brain by writing your ideas in a different genre. For example, create a script where two of your sources argue against each other, or one in which your reader argues against you. Write a historical context paragraph as a short story. Draft your article as a rant or a blog entry to experiment with strong tones.



Spatial Visualization

Grab a pack of Post-It notes. Write each idea, piece of evidence, claim, key definition, , etc., on a separate note. Arrange notes with obvious orders, like: timelines and quotes from sources who are responding to each other. With the rest, make zones on the wall: which notes seem to go together? Group them based on some sort of organization scheme, and within the groups, order the notes using a logic that makes sense to you. Each group may be a section of your essay. Re-order as you keep thinking.

With a partner: Talk out your thoughts for 5-7 minutes while they take notes, then give them 10 minutes to make every single argument they can against you. Work together to answer the arguments.
Alone: Spend 10-15 minutes writing your thoughts, then reread your writing pretending to be someone who does *not* want to agree with your idea. Add comments every time the skeptical reader would say: "You're wrong, because..." "What do you mean?" "Prove it" "Why do you believe that?" "Who cares?" etc.