**Tips & Techniques for Effective College Writing**

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Whether you are a new student or nearing the completion of your degree, writing college papers can be a confusing process. The following steps can help you focus during the writing process, saving you time to conduct effective research, get feedback, and revise as needed.

**Step 1: Determine the requirements and scope of the paper** While this step seems to be pretty self-explanatory, I have worked with students whose papers did not follow the directions set forth by the instructor. Unfortunately, I tend to see these students after their instructor has deemed the paper unacceptable. Before you begin to write or conduct research, the first thing to do is be sure you are following the criteria for the paper. Some papers will be more open-ended than others, so you will have to come up with your topic in consultation with your instructor. Other papers will have a very specific set of criteria that can include a focused topic or question. Once you have reviewed the requirements and understand the scope of the paper, keep a list of what you need to do handy throughout the writing process to avoid going off track. This list will aid you in focusing your brainstorming, researching, writing and revising.

**Step 2: Brainstorming/Pre-writing** Brainstorming before you start researching and writing is vitally important for understanding the range of ideas related to your topic. Brainstorming can point you in the direction you are most interested in learning more about and give you a starting point to develop a researchable thesis statement. Unfortunately, this is also the step that most students neglect.

When trying to develop a thesis for a paper, first identify all possible areas of interest related to your general topic. This idea generation allows you to explore all the possibilities related to the topic. You can do this by listing key words and concepts on a piece of paper or in a word processing program. You can also try to represent the information in a graphic format by using mind-mapping techniques. Mind-mapping allows you to see the relationships between ideas and to identify themes that interest you and warrant further research and development. PowerPoint can be a useful tool for mind-mapping, but a plain piece of paper and pen work just as well.

*How to Mind-map* Place all the key words and concepts related to the central theme or topic on the paper and drawing lines of connection between them. Once you have exhausted your list, the next step is to find the areas/patterns that most interest you or that seem to be the most relevant.

For example, if your topic is *the motion of water*, your list of words might include *floods, tides, ocean, sea, lake, stream, pond, shower, bathroom, drinking fountain, sink, hose, hydrant, pool, hot tub, sprinkler*, and so forth. You would then look at these words and look for a pattern. In this example, the words all relate to *different bodies of water* or *how water is used as naturally occurring sources* as well as *human constructed access* to water. After identifying the areas of interest, narrow the topic down even further. In our example, you might decide that *how humans use water* is the most interesting topic for you. Determine the next most logical line of reasoning that connects your patterns. Then develop that line of reasoning into a statement and/or the larger question that you are trying to answer. In this case, you can think about the topic of *the motion of water* as the way in which *humans access water for life saving and/or recreation*.

You might decide to focus on dams, fire hydrants and sprinkler systems or you might focus on the recreational aspects of swimming in the ocean, pools, hot tubs, and so forth. Choosing one of these areas then becomes the place to begin your research and writing. By engaging in this process, you can more easily think about a topic without trying to have the “perfect” thesis statement or research question. You can then systematically develop your ideas, see the relationships between those ideas and focus your ideas so that the order and flow of our argument will be smooth and logical. After you’ve finished the brainstorming, then you can research information more specifically related to your topic. With a more focused question/topic, the research you will conduct will be more relevant and hopefully less overwhelming than if you started with your initial broad topic.

**Step 3: Organization of the Paper**  Most people have heard of the traditional “5 Paragraph Essay.” You start with a paragraph that has an introduction to the topic of your paper and thesis statement, then you have three body paragraphs that support the thesis, and then you end with a conclusion that neatly wraps up the paper. This model does not always work well, and it can limit the way in which you approach writing. While there is comfort and merit to organizing your ideas in this manner, what you are missing out on is the thinking process that can better assist you in developing your topic and engaging your readers’ interest.

What specifically addresses your topic and what you found in your research? If you begin by *telling your audience why you are writing* OR *why the issue(s) are important*, you will better be able to grab a reader’s attention. Using our example, let’s say you chose to write about *humans’ access to water for recreational purposes and the impact on season economies*. You might start by talking about the *impact of summer water sports (boating, fishing, waterskiing) and how people near lakes and oceans in New York State have to learn to budget for their year-round expenses with income coming primarily from only a few months in the summertime*. Using the ideas from your brainstorming session and the research you conducted related to that topic, you should then think about organizing what you want to say in your paper into the following three categories:

INTRODUCTION/BEGINNING BODY/MIDDLE CONCLUSION/END

What would you need to include in the introduction to the topic? What would need to be put into the middle of the paper? And what point or ideas would you want to drive home at the end of the paper? If you consider these questions and the logical progression of your ideas, then you will better be able to get your points across and have a focused paper. Jot some notes down under the three subheadings to get an outline of your ideas together. Then, just start writing…

**Step 4: Write** In the movie Finding Forrester, Sean Connery’s character tells the young man, Jamal, “Sometimes, the simple rhythm of typing gets us from page one to page two…”. This philosophy plays out well when you realize that the first draft you write does not have to have perfect sentences, flawless punctuation, and impeccable grammar. Getting your ideas on the page or the screen is the most important step. If you spent your time thinking through the three previous steps, then this part will go more smoothly than it might have happened for you in the past. When you are struggling with what you want to say, how you want to organize your thoughts, and how to say them perfectly, your ability to write is more difficult. If you have thought about your ideas, narrowed the topic, and jotted down notes for organization, then you are able to play with language and express yourself in writing.

**Step 5: Revise & Get Feedback**  Print out your work. Take pen to paper and correct any errors you see. Read your paper out loud. It is the best way to see and hear what you are writing about and make corrections. Also, you can submit your paper to your instructor or one of the online writing tutors available to you as an Empire State college student. See the References & Resources section to find out how to access these tutors.

The steps laid out in this article are not all there is to the writing process. They are simplified steps to assist you with the process of writing and to aid you in thinking about how to write an academic paper. The most important part is the planning in steps one and two. Fully engaging in those steps will make the writing and revising an easier and hopefully less painful process.

**References & Resources**

*Online Tutoring for Empire State College Students*

All students at Empire State College have access to writing tutors available via the

Writer’s Complex (go to <http://www.esc.edu/writer> and choose Tutor’s Mailbox) or

through Smarthinking ([www.esc.edu/smarthinking](http://www.esc.edu/smarthinking) - create your username and password).

*Books*

Hjortshoj, K. (2001). The Transition to College Writing. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s.

*Empire State College Websites*

Empire State College has two comprehensive writing sites developed by faculty to assist

students with all stages of the writing process, specifically (but not exclusively) these sites

cover the following topics: Academic Reading & Critical Thinking; Academic Writing

Process; Research Writing; Documenting Sources; Business Writing; Grammar &

Punctuation; Spelling & Mechanics; Style; ESL Resources; Faculty Resources; Exercises; and

an online tutor (Writer’s Complex only).

Writer’s Complex –

<http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/home>

Genesee Valley Center Writing Program –

<http://www1.esc.edu/personalfac/hshapiro/writing_program/index.html>

*Other Websites*

Mind-mapping Resources

<http://www.buzanworld.com>

How to make a Mind-map (3.5 minute video)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UCXalYcoko&feature=related>

Maximise the Power of Your Brain – Tony Buzan Mind-mapping (5.3 minute video)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlabrWv25qQ>

Mind-mapping by Stephen Pierce (7 minute video)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvnbKEHOQIY&feature=related>