

Writing Center

WOFFORD COLLEGE

Invention Guide

Invention is a word for the mysterious process of coming up with ideas. Sometimes, invention can feel like a magic trick, and when you are stuck it can feel impossible. The key to an effective invention process is to find the practices that get you into a creative mode and harness those practices so they benefit you even during writing tasks where you have yet to find your way into the topic.

WHAT IS YOUR PROCESS?

People come up with ideas in many different ways, so just like with every part of the writing process, the most important thing is for you to experiment and explore what works best for you. However, there are a lot of tried-and-true methods that you could try to incorporate into your process if they are helpful.

Free-writing will lower the stakes of invention. When you do a free-write, you are deciding ahead of time that this is writing that is “just for you” and does not have to make it into your final essay. Writing in that way can be very helpful because you will stop second-guessing your thoughts for a few minutes and questioning whether they are “right,” at least for long enough to make some discoveries. A good free-write practice is to sit for 5-10 minutes and force yourself to continually write on the topic of your essay *without stopping*. If you run out of things to say, write through the block, even if it means writing: “Now I’m getting stuck and I’m not sure where to go next.”

Listing is a process much like free-writing, but in the form of a list or catalog of your starting thoughts. One interesting form of listing is writing a series of questions that you have about your topic. Try writing a list of every question you have on the subject of your writing for several minutes. Then, stop and review your list. Which of the questions you wrote is most interesting or complex? Start again and create a new list of questions inspired by the best question on List 1. Repeat this process until you find a rich, specific question that could motivate your writing and serve as your focus.

Mapping is a strategy for finding relationships between the different ideas you are exploring. If you have a group of ideas that you want to include as part of your writing, try creating a visual map of how they are connected to each other. Do all of your ideas spring from one central concept? Or can you start to find sub-branches in your thinking? Use lines, arrows, circles, and other markers to demonstrate the links you discover between ideas. If you have too many ideas to write about, you may want to gravitate toward keeping the ones that are clustered together and closely related.

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WHAT EXCITES YOU?

There's nothing more helpful during the invention phase than spending some time really trying to figure out what is most exciting to you about the task at hand. This will be easier and more intuitive for some assignments than others. Sometimes, your "in" to a particular topic may require you to think beyond the assignment itself and consider tangential relationships between the essay and your own experiences, questions, and interests outside of the class. But if you can identify something, anything, that really prompts an elevated response within yourself – whether that response is curiosity, frustration, pleasure, or something else – you will find that your ideas come much easier. Good writing is motivated writing. If you know that you are, for instance, excited about a connection you've made between your current Philosophy essay and an ethical dilemma you went through with your roommate last year, that feeling of excitement will give you a strong idea of what kinds of questions and content are most relevant and needed in order to explore the connection you made.

However you find the motivating factor for your writing, it will be helpful to write one *question* that connects your key point of interest to the assignment. This question can serve as the focus of your writing, and for argument-based essays, your answer to that question may become your thesis statement.

WHO CAN YOU THINK WITH?

Because invention feels like a magic trick and we are often searching for that sudden "Eureka!" moment, we can forget that our ideas are never produced in a vacuum. Our inspiration usually comes from somewhere, and there is no reason your invention process has to happen alone. Thinking with others is allowed and encouraged, especially in these early stages before you've begun to write in earnest. It is almost always helpful to talk your ideas through with someone else you trust, whether that means talking to a classmate or friend or going to your professor's office hours.

Another way we think with other people during the invention process is through reading. Your ideas are almost certainly in conversation with the assigned readings in your class. A great way to jumpstart an invention process is by going back to the relevant texts from your syllabus and re-reading them with your essay topic and questions in mind. How are your ideas in conversation with the author's ideas? Making notes in the margins of course texts can be very helpful, especially when your notes go beyond summarizing the author's ideas, articulating your own questions, confusions, associations, and moments of clarity.

WHEN DOES INVENTION HAPPEN?

We encourage you to think about your writing process as non-linear. You are coming up with ideas all the time, at every phase of the writing process, before and during drafting as well as during the revision phase. Very often, we start to really figure out what we are trying to say only as we approach the end of our writing process. Allow yourself to remain open to new ideas throughout, and don't be so committed to your initial instinct that you cut off your ability to develop, expand, or completely change your focus.

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HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE?

In order for your ideas to be understandable to your reader, you will need to think about the overall shape of your writing. What purpose does each section or paragraph of your writing serve in the larger act of communication, and how do all the parts fit together to tell that story? Some writers like to tackle the organizational puzzle at the beginning of their process using a detailed outline, while others like to produce their draft in a less structured way and then focus on organization during the revision phase. If you are thinking a lot about organization as part of your invention process, you can use your outline as another form of visual mapping.

When creating an outline, you will be breaking down your ideas into their components, creating sections and subsections that ideally add up to a focused whole. When approaching an outline, follow your professor's guidance if they've told you what should be included, but do not feel obligated to create a 5-paragraph structure with three major body paragraphs. Allow your outline to reflect your thought process as much as possible – if there are only two major branches of your thinking, then your outline should demonstrate that.

It might also be helpful to think about the sections of your outline as representing your exploration of various *sub-questions* that are prompted by the main question of your essay, rather than just as sections for different kinds of supporting evidence. When subsections are framed through questions, you have a clearer job to do in each paragraph in answering the question you've posed, and you may feel less repetitive because you are exploring different facets of your topic rather than hammering on the same points again and again. During the drafting phase, your answers to these sub-questions become the topic sentences of your paragraphs.