

We are now fully into midterm time at universities across the country. Students at the University of Saskatchewan and at most universities world-wide are expressing anxiety over their essay preparation.



While I work mostly as a business writer and editor, I am often asked to edit students' writing, whether from undergraduates or for late-stage PhD

students. . . . I find that inexperienced writers (especially undergraduates) struggle greatly to understand their position as the writer and thinker behind their essays. They sometimes cannot fathom how to treat the essay as an attempt (from the French “*essayer*,” to “try”) to test out their arguments on a (hypothetical) academic audience--usually the professors or teaching assistants of their courses.

If those struggles describe you, then today's blog posting is for you.

American writing coach Lora Wegman has published a list of three brainstorming techniques to help writers to get past the challenge of getting started on essay writing. I revisit them below, to help you when you struggle to think and write in academic prose.

Beginning with a blank page could make anyone uneasy. Sometimes the very first sentence can feel like a “roadblock to completing the remainder of the project.” Wegman recommends using three excellent brainstorming techniques to jumpstart your creative thinking and help you get words on paper:

(1) Write out your argument as a dialogue:

If you feel unclear about what you're trying to argue, try brainstorming ideas as if you are writing a “one-act play in which two people are arguing about your topic.” Write the first person in this mock-drama as saying one of the major points you want to use in your essay.

Then imagine what the second person in such a “play” would argue back.

From there, continue the argument, by having the first person “rebut with relevant facts.”

This may sound artificial, but planning this conversation will help you to strengthen your arguments and identify any areas where your argument is weak and may need added thought or knowledge on the topic.

Wegman gives the following example, which I've modified for Canadian writers:

Person A: The longer Members of the House of Parliament stay in office, the more out of touch they become with their constituents at home. Having shorter term limits are the best solution to this problem.

Person B: But being a Member of Parliament comes with a huge learning curve! People who can serve for multiple terms will be better representatives because they will be more effective and understand how processes work.

Continue with this two-part dialogue to help you to clarify what the major points and counterpoints are, which you will need to address in your essay.

(2) Wegman also recommends that you **remember the five Ws and one H technique:**

By thinking about the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of your topic, you will help yourself to focus your mind and to brainstorm answers to all of the important questions.



Consider a topic pertaining to the social and literary impact of *Wuthering Heights*:

- ✓ Who: Emily Bronte, author of *Wuthering Heights*; about characters Catherine (the elder) and Heathcliff.
- ✓ What: Explored identity politics intensively through these protagonists.
- ✓ When: Published in 1847, but can be read with contemporary literary and psychology, so that the novel may be said to be timeless.
- ✓ Where: Was written in poverty and obscurity by Bronte, living in rural Yorkshire, about similarly unprivileged characters. (Written under a male pseudonym—Ellis Bell.) Contrasts between rural and urban and between classes are essential to the social impact of the novel.
- ✓ Why: Themes of difference, belonging, identity and outsider status are central to the novel.

- ✓ How: The difficulties young readers face of comprehending the plot twists in *WH* can be overcome by analyzing the psychological depth of characterization in the novel.

(3) Try using *mind mapping*:

Many students think visually, so that mapping out your ideas on plain paper can help to develop your thinking.

Start with a few words summarizing your topic in the centre of the page. Next, list the key points that you can think of, around that centre. As you think of other concepts and relationships between key concepts, you can connect them with lines on the paper. You can see how to logically group concepts together this way (and can use coloured pencils to organize your major points, coherently).

There are lots of templates for mind-mapping that can be found online. But all you really need is some blank paper, a sharp pencil, eraser and some coloured pencils. I have used sticky notes to move around key ideas, etc., but you'll naturally find what works best for you, in the doing.



These three techniques should effectively end confusion over what essay writing is about, as well as help to eliminate writers' block and related problems like procrastination. Writing in dialogue, plotting out the 5 Ws and one H, and using a mind map are strategies that you can use to dive deeply into the thinking and writing you need to do, in order to master the essay form.

Two guides on essay writing that I recommend for further reading are *Thinking it Through: A Practical Guide to Academic Essay Writing* (Trent University Academic Skills Centre) and *Academic Writing: How to Read and Write Scholarly Prose* (Janet Giltrow).

If you pair these guides with Wegman's brainstorming exercises and the vagueness of essay (and thesis) writing will melt away. Good luck!