Checklist for assessing the writing situation

At the beginning of the writing process, you may not be able to answer all of the questions on this checklist. That's fine. Just be prepared to think about them later.

NOTE: It is not necessary to think about the elements of a writing situation in the exact order listed in this chart.

**AUDIENCE**
- How well informed are your readers about the subject? What do you want them to learn about the subject?
- How interested and attentive are they likely to be? Will they resist any of your ideas?
- What is your relationship to them: Employee to supervisor? Citizen to citizen? Expert to novice? Scholar to scholar?
- How much time are they willing to spend reading?
- How sophisticated are they as readers? Do they have large vocabularies? Can they follow long and complex sentences?

**LENGTH AND DOCUMENT DESIGN**
- Are you working within any length specifications? If not, what length seems appropriate, given your subject, your purpose, and your audience?
- Must you use a particular design or format for your document? If so, do you have guidelines or examples that you can consult?

**REVIEWERS AND DEADLINES**
- Who will be reviewing your draft in progress: Your instructor? A writing center tutor? Your classmates? A friend? Someone in your family?
- What is your deadline? How much time will you need to allow for the various stages of writing, including typing and proofreading the final draft?

**SUBJECT**
- Has a subject (or a range of possible subjects) been given to you, or are you free to choose your own?
- Is your subject worth writing about? Can you think of any readers who might be interested in reading about it?
- How broadly can you cover the subject? Do you need to narrow it to a more specific topic (because of length restrictions, for instance)?
- How detailed should your coverage be?

**SOURCE OF INFORMATION**
- Where will your information come from: Personal experience? Direct observation? Interviews? Questionnaires? Reading? The Internet?
- If your information comes from reading or the Internet, what sort of documentation is required?

**PURPOSE**
- Why are you writing? To inform readers? To persuade them? To entertain them? To call them to action? Some combination of these?

Whatever technique you turn to, the goal is the same: to generate a wealth of ideas. At this early stage of the writing process, you should aim for quantity, not necessarily quality, of ideas. If an idea proves to be off the point, trivial, or too far-fetched, you can always throw it out later.

**Listing**
You might begin by simply listing ideas, putting them down in the order in which they occur to you—a technique sometimes known as “brainstorming.” Here, for example, is a list one student writer jotted down:

- Lifeguarding—an ideal summer job?
- my love of swimming and lying in the sun
- hired by Powderrmill Village, an apartment complex

first, though, there was a test
two weeks of training—grueling physical punishment plus book work
I passed. The work was over—or so I thought,
greeted by manager; handed a broom, hose, bottle of disinfectant
scrubbing bathrooms, cleaning the pool, clearing the deck of dirt and leaves
little kids breaking every pool rule in the book—running on deck, hanging on buoyed ropes, trying to drown each other
spent most of my time blowing the whistle
working the evening shift no better—adults smuggling in gin and tonics, sexual advances from married men
by end of day, a headache and broom-handled hands

The ideas appear here in the order in which they first occurred to the writer. Later she felt free to rearrange them, to cluster them under general categories, to delete some, and to add others. In other words, she treated her initial list as a source of ideas and a springboard to new ideas, not as an outline.

Clustering

Unlike listing, the technique of clustering highlights relationships among ideas. To cluster ideas, write your topic in the center of a sheet of paper, draw a circle around it, and surround that with related ideas connected to it with lines. If some of the satellite ideas lead to more specific clusters, write them down as well. The writer of the following diagram was exploring ideas for an essay on home uses for computers.

![Diagram showing clusters of ideas related to home uses for computers]

Asking questions

By asking relevant questions, you can generate many ideas — and you can make sure that you have adequately surveyed your subject. When gathering material for a story, journalists routinely ask themselves Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? In addition to helping journalists get started, these questions ensure that they will not overlook an important fact: the date of a prospective summit meeting, for example, or the exact location of a neighborhood burglary.

Whenever you are writing about events, whether current or historical, the journalist’s questions are one way to get started. One student, whose subject was the negative reaction in 1915 to D. W. Griffith’s silent film The Birth of a Nation, began exploring her topic with this set of questions:

- Who objected to the film?
- What were the objections?
- When were protests first voiced?
- Where were protests most strongly expressed?
- Why did protesters object to the film?
- How did protesters make their views known?

Freewriting

In its purest form, freewriting is simply non-stop writing. You set aside ten minutes or so and write whatever comes to you, without pausing to think about word choice, spelling, or even meaning. If you get stuck, you can write about being stuck, but you should keep your pencil moving. The point is to loosen up, relax, and see what happens. Even if nothing much happens, you have lost only ten minutes. It’s more likely, though, that something interesting will emerge on paper — perhaps an eloquent sentence, an honest expression of feeling, or a line of thought worth exploring.

To explore ideas on a particular topic, consider using a technique known as focused freewriting. Again, you write quickly and freely — without regard for word choice, spelling, punctuation, or even paragraphing — but this time you focus on a subject and pay some attention to meaning. The following passage was written freely by a student who was recalling childhood visits to his grandparents’ farm.

Memories. Memories of Canton, Mississippi. We called it The Farm, like it was the only farm in the world. There was lois to keep us busy, 90 acres of untamed pastures. One of the first things that comes to mind is playing in the haybarn, climbing through the hay stacked high to the rafters. We would burrough a path between the bails tunnelling our way to the top. This was alot of fun until someone disturbed one of the many wasp nests making everyone scatter. Cruising the pastures, we enjoyed testing sound travel. We would spread out from each other and still talk at a normal tone audibly. I remember once getting over 100 yards away from my brother — although we would have to talk slowly and clearly, we could
understand each other. Another game for the pasture was to lie on the ground, be very quiet, slow our breathing, and wait for the buzzards. We could never figure out how they knew we weren’t dead.

—David Queen, student

Despite the awkward beginning, the misspellings, and some problems with punctuation, this freewriting has potential. Its writer later polished some of the sentences and included them in an essay.

**Annotating texts and taking notes**

When you write about reading, one of the best ways to explore ideas is to mark up the text on the pages themselves if you own the work, or photocopies if you don’t.

The following example is a paragraph from William J. Bennett’s “Drug Policy and the Intellectuals,” with a few comments penciled in the margins:

The issue I want to address is our national drug policy and the intellectuals. Unfortunately, the issue is a little one-sided. There is a very great deal to say about our national drug policy, but much less to say about the intellectuals — except that by and large, they’re against it. Why they should be against it is an interesting question, perhaps more of a social-psychological question than a properly intellectual one. But whatever the reasons, I’m sorry to say that on proper intellectual grounds the arguments mustered against our current drug policy by America’s intellectuals make for very thin gruel indeed.

Why this metaphor?

In addition to annotating texts, you will often want to take notes on your reading.

**Keeping a journal**

A journal is a collection of personal, exploratory writings. An entry in a journal can be any length—from a single sentence to several pages—and it is likely to be informal and experimental.

In a journal, meant for your eyes only, you can take risks. In one entry, for example, you might do some freewriting or focused freewriting. In another, you might pose a series of interesting questions, whether or not you have the answers. In still another, you might play around with language for the sheer fun of it: writing “purple prose,” for instance, or parodying the style of a favorite author or songwriter.

**Talking and listening**

The early stages of the writing process do not have to be lonely. Many writers begin a writing project by brainstorming ideas in a group, debating a point with friends, or engaging in conversation with a professor. Others turn to themselves for company—by talking nonstop into a tape recorder.

If your computer is equipped with a modem, you can “virtually converse” by exchanging ideas through e-mail, by joining an Internet chat group, or by following a listserv discussion. If you are part of a networked classroom, you may be encouraged to exchange ideas with your classmates and instructor in an electronic workshop.

Talking can be a good way to get to know your audience. If you’re planning to write a narrative, for instance, you can test its dramatic effect on a group of friends. Or if you hope to advance a certain argument, you can try it out on listeners who hold a different view.

As you have no doubt discovered, conversation can deepen and refine your ideas before you even begin to set them down on paper. Our first thoughts are not necessarily our wisest thoughts; by talking and listening to others we can all stretch our potential as thinkers and as writers.

**The Internet**

The Internet is a rich source of information that is fast and convenient to use, although its sheer magnitude can be overwhelming. A good way to begin exploring your subject on the Internet is through a search engine such as Yahoo! or Excite. A student looking for trends in teenage smoking, for example, might start by entering teenage and smoking in Excite’s search box. Even a fairly focused subject such as this can unleash thousands of sites. However, so always be prepared to narrow your search to make it more manageable. In the smoking example, the student might modify the search to read teenage and smoking and advertising, which would cut the number of sites listed in half.