

Getting Started: Facing the Blank Page

One of the hardest things about writing is getting started. At one time or another, we've all put off writing a paper, finding multiple reasons to avoid getting started. The good news is that there are a number of techniques that can get you moving in the right (or write) direction.

Realize that there's no perfect formula for writing a paper, and that no one—not even experienced, professional writers—writes a perfect first draft. If writing the first paragraph stumps you, move on to the second. Often you'll find out what your thesis really is as you write. That's fine. You can always revise.

Writing is a process. While you wouldn't necessarily do all of these, here are the basic strategies you could take in getting started on your paper:

- Making a list with target deadline dates
- Setting a regular time and place for writing
- Jotting down paper ideas during note taking in class
- Limiting your research time
- Thinking about your topic
- Formulating questions about your topic
- Freewriting about your topic
- Listing ideas about your topic
- Clustering ideas about your topic
- Outlining the structure of your paper

For the purposes of this handout, let's say that you've been asked to write a paper about a cultural icon, an image that's so strong that almost anyone can recognize it. You aren't required to do any research for this paper, although you may want to just to get your ideas going.

Making a List with Target Deadline Dates

You'll have a much easier time writing your paper if you break the assignment down into smaller chunks. Let's say your professor assigns this paper during the second week of the semester; it's actually due in the sixth week of school.

Your list of target deadline dates might look like this:

- Week 2: Paper Assigned; Pick Paper Topic
- Week 3: Freewriting, Listing, and Outlining
- Week 4: Develop First Paragraph
- Week 5: Rough Draft; Revise
- Week 6: Paper Due

Setting a Regular Time and Place for Writing

You decide that based on your schedule, you will write every Tuesday and Thursday evening from 6:00 until 7:00; you'll do your writing on the second floor of the library.

That hour can consist of any work that you do towards getting the paper written, whether it's doing prewriting, drafting, or revising your paper. Treat the time the same way you would treat a job; arrive on time, ready to work, with everything you need to perform the task.

Jotting Down Paper Ideas During Note Taking in Class

While you're in class, you've jotted down notes. You like to write in things that really draw your attention in the margins of the notes because you've discovered that's a good way to get ideas for papers. You notice that you have more margin notes about the Marlboro Man than any other cultural icon you've discussed in class.

You've heard that term from a cooking program your mother sometimes watches, "The Pioneer Woman." Ree Drummond, the host of the show, refers to her cattle rancher husband as "Marlboro Man." Before this class, you had no idea that the term was originally used as an ad campaign for Marlboro cigarettes.

Jotting down paper ideas in the margins of your notes helps you with your paper ideas, one of the biggest hurdles of the paper writing process. You'll find it much easier to write when you're interested in the paper topic.

Limiting Your Research Time

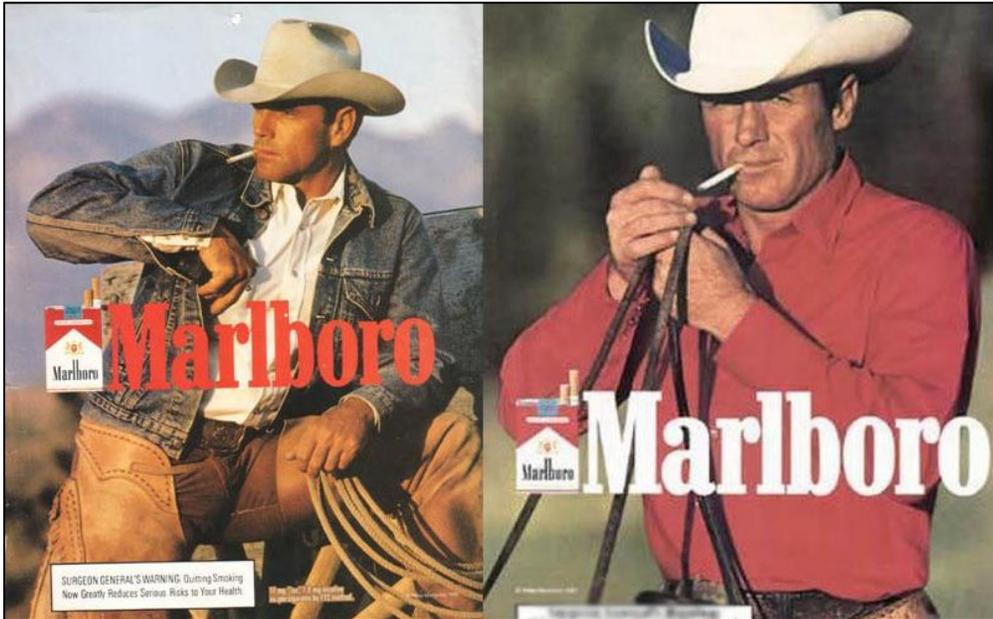
While you don't have to do any research for this paper, here's a tip for when you do. Limit the amount of time and the number of sources you'll use for your paper. It's easy to get so caught up in reading interesting material that you use that as a reason not to work on your paper.

When in doubt, ask your professor about how many sources he or she expects you to have for your paper. Give yourself a research deadline and stick to it. Finally, realize that you may not end up using all of the information you find, no matter how good it seems to be. That's a natural part of the writing process. If you can't decide, try to rank your sources from best to worst, and then use the top half.



Thinking about Your Topic

As simple as it sounds, thinking about your topic is an important component of writing your paper. You've used a basic Google search to look at some of the old Marlboro Man ads:



The image from the ads fit your original idea of what a “Marlboro Man” is, but you’re jarred by the cigarette. In the color version of the ad, you also notice that the cowboy wears a white hat and a red shirt. You think about the implications for the next few days.

Formulating Questions about Your Topic

Next, you start to ask yourself some questions about the Marlboro Man. You decide to type the questions down.

- Why did the advertising agency choose this image?
- Who was the advertising agency’s target market?
- What does the cowboy have to do with smoking?
- When did the ad campaign start?
- How long had the cigarette brand been around before this ad campaign?
- Did the cigarettes sell better or worse after this ad campaign?
- What do most people think of when you say the term “Marlboro Man”?
- Is there any significance to the direction the cowboy is looking?
- Why do both cowboys have their hand on either a rope or the reins?

All of these questions have potential, and now you can start to get some more refined ideas about your paper. Realize, however, that you may have to eliminate some of the questions because of the length requirements for the paper, or possibly because the questions don’t really fit with what you want to write. That’s just another natural part of the writing process.



Freewriting about Your Topic

When you use the freewriting technique, you set yourself a short time limit and write everything that comes to mind. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, or anything else. Set a short time limit, like ten or fifteen minutes, and just write.

Wonder why they chose a cowboy. Wild west. He's rugged handsome Looking to the left Could mean he's liberal? Hands on rope—he's in charge. Smoking like being on the frontier? Rugged mountain background on left photo. Definitely outdoorsy. White hat. He's a good guy. Red positive, passionate. Looking straight at camera on right photo. Not embarrassed about smoking. Not apologetic. What do we think of cowboys Simple values simple lifestyle Guy looks like manly man Maybe real men are cowboys=smoking=idea of Marlboro Man and what that means

None of these ideas are really developed, so they might not make it into your paper. However, freewriting can help stimulate your thought process and aid you in using your critical thinking skills, which is one of the main reasons professors have you write papers in the first place.



Listing Ideas about Your Topic

Listing really works in much the same way as freewriting. Instead of just letting whatever comes into your head come out freeform, you might put the same ideas in a list. When you use the listing technique, you don't need to put things in order, and you don't concern yourself with spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

1. Wonder why they chose a cowboy.
2. Wild west.
3. He's rugged handsome
4. Looking to the left
5. Could mean he's liberal?
6. Hands on rope—he's in charge.
7. Smoking like being on the frontier?
8. Rugged mountain background on left photo.
9. Definitely outdoorsy.
10. White hat.
11. He's a good guy.
12. Red positive, passionate.
13. Looking straight at camera on right photo.
14. Not embarrassed about smoking.
15. Not apologetic.
16. What do we think of cowboys
17. Simple values simple lifestyle
18. Guy looks like manly man
19. Maybe real men are cowboys=smoking=idea of Marlboro Man and what that means

The advantage of listing over freewriting is that you can see the items you've written as individual elements. You can then reorganize the numbers, putting like items together.

1. Hands on rope—he's in charge
2. White hat—good guy
3. Guy looks like manly man
4. Ruggedly handsome
5. Simple values, simple lifestyle
6. Real men are cowboys

Now you're on the way to a sort of outline. You could use this list to shape your paper, discussing the numbered items one by one.

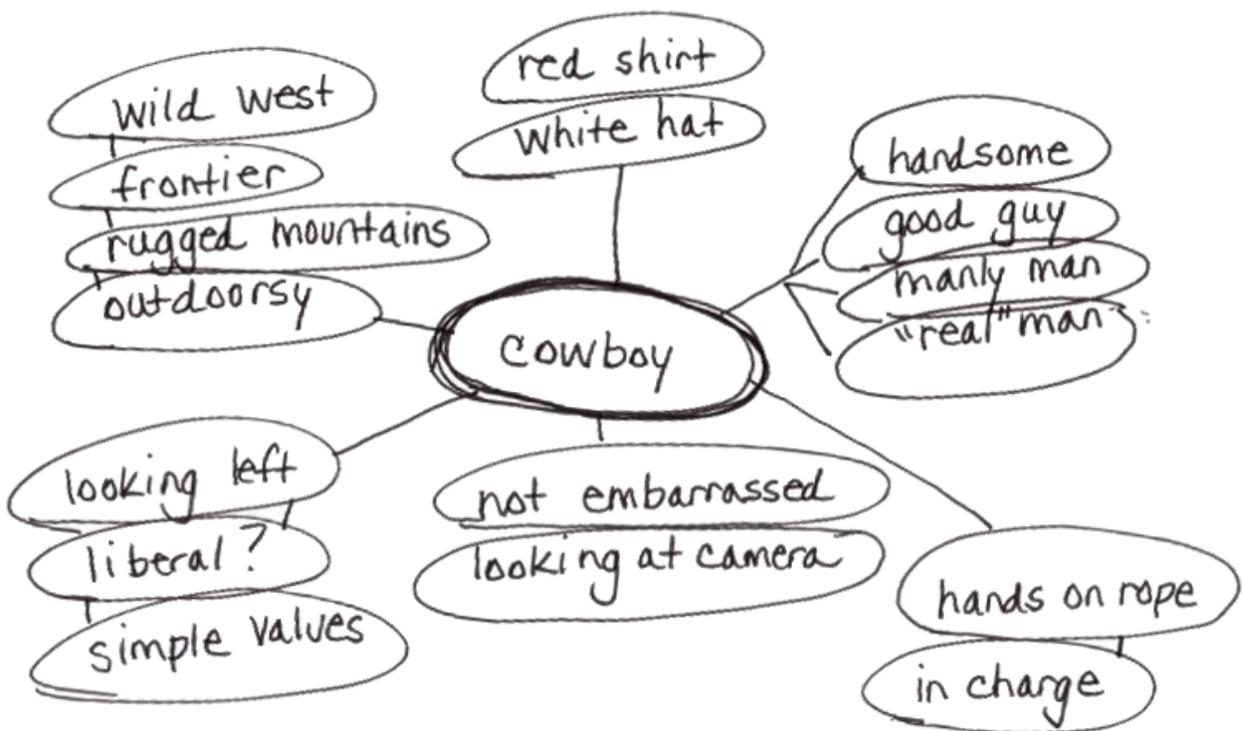


Clustering Ideas about Your Topic

Clustering is another invention technique. When you cluster, you

- Start by putting your main idea in the center of the page
- Write other sets of words, trying to keep like ideas together
- Draw circles around each set of words
- Draw lines from each circle, connecting the groups of words to the main idea

Clustering is very visual because it lets you “see” how ideas are logically related to each other. You can see from the cluster below that we have six groups of ideas about the cowboy.



Outlining the Structure of Your Paper

Outlining is a natural progression and streamlining of listing and clustering. You can certainly use the very formal Roman numeral type of outline you probably learned in high school. It looks something like this

- I. Main idea
 - a. Detail of main idea
 - b. Another detail of main idea
- II. Next big idea
 - a. Detail of main idea
 - i. Finer detail of idea
 - ii. Another finer detail of idea
 - b. Another detail of main idea

That type of very formal outline works well, but don't limit yourself to it. Your outline can take a more informal shape and still work very well. Your outline for the Marlboro Man paper might look something like this:

Marlboro Man as a Cultural Icon

1. The Marlboro Man symbolizes the Wild West
 - a. He's depicted outside
 - b. He's on the frontier
 - c. He's rugged like the mountains
 - d. He's outdoorsy
2. The Marlboro Man is in charge
 - a. He has his hand on the rope
 - b. He has his hand on the reins
 - c. He's in charge
3. The Marlboro Man symbolizes simple values
 - a. He's looking left
 - b. His left glance may indicate liberal values
4. The Marlboro Man is a hero
 - a. He wears a white hat
 - b. He wears a bold red shirt
5. The Marlboro Man is handsome
 - a. He is "manly" man
 - b. He is a "real" man
 - c. He is "good" guy
6. The Marlboro Man is a independent
 - a. He is not embarrassed to smoke
 - b. He is looking directly at the camera



The more detail you add to your outline, the easier it will be to write a draft of your paper. Think of the outline as a map—it “tells” you where to head next as you discuss your topic.

One Final Trick

If you’re still feeling that old writer’s block, sometimes one of the best things you can do is to simply walk away from the computer for a short break. Eat a snack. Send a text. Rest for 15 minutes. Then think about how you would say your idea to your best friend. When we write, we always must remember that there’s a human being on the other end, reading our words and trying to understand what we mean. The simple language you use when you talk to your best friend often translates quite well to the written page.

You don’t have to use all of the techniques detailed in this handout. Take some time to experiment with them, and then decide which techniques work best for you. Not only will you have started, but you’ll actually be finished with that paper in no time. Good luck!

Works Cited

“You Have Your Reasons and So Does the Tobacco Industry.” Marlboro Man Ad. Web 11 June 2015.

<http://www.districthypnosis.com/2014/07/you-have-your-reasons/>

