

The 7 Step Prewriting Process for Composing an Academic Essay

STEP 1: Read the Text

With pen in hand, **actively read** the text, **text marking** (in the margins) words, ideas and concepts that interest, intrigue or puzzle you.

STEP 2: Talk With Others

- **This step can be done before and after all of the following steps!**
- The best way to help solidify your preliminary thinking about a text is to talk with people about it.
- Your classmates are the best choice because you know that they have read the same work, but it can be anyone whose opinion you trust.
- Your notes from Step 1 will form the starting point for your conversation.

STEP 3: Brainstorm (From the General to the Less General)

Based on your annotations, and *without censoring yourself*, **write in your journal whatever comes into your mind** that the text triggers in your imagination, such as:

- What, in your opinion, is the author's intended "**meaning**" of the text?
- What is the "**significance**" of the text for you, as the reader?
- What "**reasonable inferences**" (which will lead you to a thesis) can you make about this text that can be supported in the body of your essay?
- What individual responses, from your own previous experience, do you bring to your reading of this text?

STEP 4: Freewrite (From the Less General to the Specific)

This step is similar to brainstorming, *but more structured*. You must begin moving away from the random, free flow of ideas to **a more structured thought process**.

You need to:

- **Extract** the most promising thoughts and ideas from your brainstorming (Step 3) and **concentrate on one issue that interests you**.
- Write down **everything you can think of** that relates to this one issue.
- The **literary categories** (characterization, plot, setting, symbolism, etc.) can provide you with specific angles from which to approach the literature.
- **Ask A LOT of questions!**

STEP 5: Ask Questions (Moving Towards a Thesis)

This step should be done at the same time as Step 4.

- You must begin formulating **specific**, “**problematic**” questions that you have about this text (about whatever seems interesting or promising to you, e.g. theme, plot, characterization, irony, role of time or nature, etc.).
- These questions will drive your research into the text and provide a framework to begin forming a **Thesis**.
- **Asking questions is central to the essay writing process!!**

STEP 6: Arrive at a Thesis (and arguing it)

Steps 5 & 6 are very closely tied together.

- At this point you should have a strong idea of what your **argument** will be.
- You need to express this argument as an **assertion, which is your *answer to one central, problematic question that underlies your entire essay*** (see Step 5).
- This assertion must be stated as a **complete sentence** and will appear in the Introduction of your essay.

Here is a sample problematic question, followed by its answer (Thesis):

Q: Does rap music promote and endorse violence in America’s youth culture?

(This a “good” question because it can lead to discussion and disagreement).

A: Rap music does not promote and endorse violence in America’s youth culture because.....

(The “because” is very important because it makes the Thesis **SPECIFIC and OPINIONATED**).

STEP 7: Create an Outline

- For each paragraph that you plan to have, jot down the gist of the **topic sentence**.
- Underneath this heading (indented), jot down **key words/phrases** for the ideas to be developed in that paragraph.
- You will also need to include in the outline an indication of the **function** of each paragraph. This will help you create an **effective structure**.
- Thinking about function will provide you with:
 1. The sequence of major topics.
 2. The degree of development of these topics.
 3. The argument/Thesis.
- Look to the text(s) for specific textual references (**quotes**) that support/refute the various points you plan to make.

You are now ready to begin **drafting** your essay.

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