

BEGINNING AN ESSAY

Regis Writing Center

Beginning an essay is difficult for many students because they do not know what the professor wants, where to start, or what information to include. Asking yourself the following questions may be helpful when you are not sure where to start.

What question is the professor asking?

Clarify the question so you do not write “off-topic.” If you cannot do this on your own, talk with your professor. He or she completely understands the assignment and expectations.

Talk about the general topic with friends and classmates. Develop ideas but be careful that the ideas are **YOURS**.

Where do I start?

If you are having trouble finding a topic

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| Brainstorm: | List all information pertinent to the topic. |
| Freewrite: | Write anything about the topic for five minutes without stopping. Even if all you can think of is “I want to be outside,” write that until a new idea comes to mind. |

Organize your ideas. Use one of the following techniques to develop a framework for your writing.

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| Cluster or Web: | Place the central topic in the middle and add ideas around the central topic. Add thoughts related to the subtopics until you have a web of ideas. |
| Outline: | Organize central topics, subtopics, and supporting ideas by using Roman numerals, capital letters, and Arabic numbers to emphasize the relative importance of each idea. |
| Flow chart: | Start with one idea and draw an arrow to your next topic, then another arrow to the next. |

What information do I include?

Define your audience and visualize this audience as you write. If you are not sure who the audience is, ask your professor. Include information that answers the essay question and helps your audience understand the topic. If your audience is general, you must provide background information and definitions; if your audience is informed students, you do not have to provide common information you have been exposed to in class; if your audience is your professor or a professional, you can assume a sophisticated knowledge of the subject. However, even if your audience is knowledgeable about the subject, make sure you provide logical connections between related material.

If you are asked to provide an analysis, separate the subject into components and then look for patterns or relationships. Do not summarize or describe outside sources unless your audience would not be familiar with them.

How do I avoid generalizations?

Use specific information rather than generalizations to gain the attention of your readers and to establish credibility. Specific information may include concrete details, facts, examples, or other evidence that supports your ideas.

Generalization: People feel that not sleeping enough may adversely affect their performance.

Specific: Lack of sleep affects adults and children. According to Dr. James Maas, author of *Power Sleep*, the majority of college students suffer from sleep deprivation, and only 1 percent of college students feel alert all day (23).

If you provide information from outside sources, be sure to credit these sources through documentation such as the APA or MLA. If you used the example above in a paper, you would also include a works cited page with publication information about the book *Power Sleep*.