

## Starting the Writing Process

Starting an application essay is perhaps the hardest point in the entire process. Few people write about themselves with great confidence. Some students miss the opportunity to benefit from a fellowship application or even from graduate school because they never get over the initial reluctance to start the essay. Where do you begin?

Start before you are ready. Think about the questions in [Making Connections](#). Ask yourself, who am I, and who do I want to be? Create a folder for random notes for your personal statement or application essay. Be ready to jot down ideas at any time. Make an inventory of everything you have done as an undergraduate. Selected parts of this inventory will be featured in the essay eventually, but try to be inclusive at first.

Try scheduling short appointments with yourself to generate ideas and to write. These could be for 30 minutes, or an hour, several days a week. If you can make it to practice, rehearsal, meetings, classes, or work, then you can schedule these short blocks of time for yourself, just to reflect and to write.

Avoid binges in which you attempt to write a polished essay at one sitting before a deadline or meeting with an advisor. Allow yourself enough time to go through the entire process of writing and revision. After re-reading the essay prompts and the [Definition of a Personal Statement](#), consider these techniques for generating, organizing, and drafting the essay.

### Generating Content

To start, try to generate ideas and simply get things down on paper. Many people find it helps to try brainstorming, free writing, or clustering:

#### 1) *Brainstorming:*

Brainstorming means coming up with ideas of how to approach a topic. Set a time limit and write down in list form every word or phrase that comes to you about the essay topic. Make a list of things you have done or aspects of your topic. When you are finished, look over the list and look for patterns, clusters of interesting ideas, or one central idea.

#### 2) *Free writing:*

Once you have some ideas, set a time limit and write about each one *without stopping*. When the time is up, look at what you have written. Look over your writing and determine which idea seems most significant. Much of your writing will be irrelevant or even nonsensical, but you may find important insights and ideas with which to work.

#### 3) *Clustering:*

Clustering is a way to generate ideas using a visual scheme or chart. It is useful for understanding the relationships among the parts of a broad topic and for developing sub-topics.

- Write down your topic in the middle of a blank piece of paper and circle it.
- In a ring around the topic circle, write down what you see as the main parts of the topic and circle each one.
- In a ring around the main parts, write down examples, facts or details.

- Keep clustering until you list everything you want to say. Clustering should enable you to tell if you need to do more research on your topic.

### **Organizing Material**

As you come up with information for your essay, you will need to think about how to organize it. The most efficient way to organize your ideas is through a series of outlines.

- Once you know the basic content of your essay, write a list of the main points you want to make. Organize the list. Try to make each point flow from the previous point and link to the next point. Sometimes, an abrupt transition may be appropriate.
- When you have an organized list of main points, fill in the supporting information for each one.
- Once you have a general sense of the organization that the essay will follow, write a detailed formal outline. A formal outline will allow you to see exactly how the parts of the essay fit together. Also, you will be able to tell if you need to do more research for a particular point.

### **Drafting the Essay**

After you develop an outline, write a rough draft of the essay. If you get stuck, make a new outline. When you have written a draft, put it away for a few days and then review it again. Leave yourself plenty of time to revise and edit.

#### *Revising:*

Revising and editing are not the same. Revision means literally “to look again” at something. Take a fresh look at the organization of your points, how well they are developed, and how persuasive the essay is. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Do I clearly express myself? Does the essay convey my purpose?
- Do I take a stance on the issue I am addressing?
- Is the essay appropriate for an audience of application evaluators?

Be willing to experiment with completely different versions. You will know when a paragraph or section begins to gel.

#### *Editing:*

Once you have revised your essay, edit it. Editing entails fine-tuning your prose and checking your grammar, punctuation, tone, spelling and formatting.

### **Get an Outside Opinion**

Once you have revised and edited your essay, you may be too tired of it to evaluate its effectiveness. At this point, it is a good idea to have other people read over the essay.

- Ask at least one a peer (a friend or a tutor at the writing center) and one expert in your field to respond to it. You may want to ask an academic advisor, professor, work supervisor, or scholarship advisor.
- Remember that asking someone to read your essay is a favor. If someone agrees to read it, he or she will appreciate it if the essay is as polished as you can make it.

Be prepared to revise the essay again based on the feedback that you receive. If you get stuck at an earlier stage in the process, talk to other people. “Outside opinions” can help at any time.