

# Writing and Tutorial Center

---

## Laying the Groundwork for Your Paper

Oftentimes when you begin a writing assignment, you can find yourself stuck as to where to start. Let's go over a few things you can do before you jump right into a rough draft that will hopefully make you feel better prepared and give you the structure to write a great essay.

### PRE-WRITING

The truth is that there's no one-size-fits-all method for writing, but one thing that almost all successful writers do is pre-write in some way. This term can sound intimidating, but it really just means having some kind of written plan.

The first thing to consider is purpose. Why are you writing this? What is the specific goal? Yes, it may be that you're writing an essay because you'll be graded on it, but I promise professors don't assign work just to grade it. The point of most writing assignments is to make you think, both about the topic but also about the process of explaining or exploring that topic.

Research essays in particular are about showing off your ability to firstly research and secondly synthesize that research in your own words. This is why, beyond academic integrity and honesty, it's so important to do your own work.

Once you understand the purpose of the assignment, it's time to find a topic. Sometimes this is already chosen for you, but often at Pratt, professors will give open ended prompts so that students can tailor their paper to their own interests. This can be overwhelming, but let's narrow it down by answering these four questions:

- 1) Does the assignment sheet give any specific directions or suggested topics?
- 2) What is the topic of the class and/or of the section that the assignment is part of?
- 3) What are your interests? How might they relate to the assignment?
- 4) What is the scope of the assignment? Do you have time/energy/space to deep dive or is it more of a shallow exploration?

Lisa's professor gave them a brief and somewhat vague assignment description:

*"Write a research paper (5-7 pg) describing an art movement from sometime in the last 200 years. Discuss key figures and pieces as well as the underlying philosophy of the movement. Be sure to use descriptive language and include at least three scholarly sources."*

How would you approach this? Let's take a moment to play out Lisa's thought process...

This gives us a pretty clear direction, but such a wide range of options might also seem daunting. The last two hundred years of art history includes anything from Neoclassicism and Romanticism to Conceptual and Cubism. The overall class topic is Modern Art (1800 and on), so that doesn't narrow it down very much. This is a midterm project and by this point in the semester, the students have only really gotten to the mid-twentieth century. They could choose a more recent movement, but it may be better to choose a movement that has already been covered in class.

Narrowing things down to art movements between the 1820s - 1950s still leaves us with a lot of choices—this is where personal taste comes in. Lisa is a printmaking major and their personal art takes a lot of inspiration from Art Nouveau, specifically the work of Alphonse Mucha. In this class they *did* learn a bit about the Art Deco movement, which has a lot of aesthetic overlap with Art Nouveau. By finding a way to satisfy the requirements of the assignment while also tailoring it to their own personal interests, Lisa is confident that she'll have enough to write about (and be motivated to do so!)

Finally, let's consider the scope and length. The paper is expected to be at least five pages, but no more than seven. For this kind of project any movement they choose should work within that constraint, but for a more broad project it may be important to consider how much research you may have to do and the time you have to do it. Remember that what you write for a grade doesn't have to be the end of the project. You can always take work that you start in class and turn it into a larger project later. That's how a lot of people get ideas for their thesis or capstone project!

## OTHER WAYS TO FIND TOPICS

If your assignment is more vague, or the above questions aren't enough, there are other tricks you can try in order to find a topic:

**Free-writing** is a way of writing out your thoughts as you have them. Kind of like stream of consciousness, the idea is to start thinking about one thing and follow where that leads. Find a nice quiet space to work, refill your water bottle, and let the words flow from your brain to your pen. As an exercise, you may want to set a timer and not stop writing for the entire duration in order to push through any hesitations.

**Clustering** is a process you're likely familiar with. Sometimes called a writing web, this is a way of visually displaying ideas and how they relate to one another. This can be especially helpful for artists and designers who work better when they can see everything laid out in front of them. Think of a detective's bulletin board with newspaper clippings, photographs, and red string connecting it all together.

**Discussing or brainstorming** with a classmate, friend, or tutor is also a good way to generate ideas. It can be helpful to simply verbalize the process and get it out of your head. Getting feedback and responses from an outside source might highlight things you hadn't yet realized.

**The Writing Center** is also a resource you have available. Located in North Hall and open Monday-Friday, we're here to help you through every step of the writing process. You don't even need to have anything written yet, our tutors can help you plan and outline your project, as well as polish up a final draft or respond to your professor's feedback. [Schedule an appointment with a tutor today!](#)