



Finding Ideas

Overview

If it was possible to reduce good academic writing to an equation, it would be this:

$$\textit{Interesting Ideas} + \textit{Clear Communication} = \textit{Good Writing}$$

Now, we all know that it is not quite so simple but it's not a bad place to start. For many students, however, it's the generation of interesting ideas that really gets them stuck. Let's explore that a bit.

Teachers of writing call this act of generating ideas invention. When we generate an idea, we invent something. It's useful to think about the origins of that word invent. It comes from the Latin word inventis which means to "come upon" or "discover". According to that definition, we don't create our ideas so much as we discover them; we unearth them. This is a useful way to think about it. The struggle to come up with interesting ideas for your writing is not an act of creation; it's an act of discovery. And, following this logic, making a discovery requires a search of some kind – not an aimless search, but a search with purpose. We have to know where to look. We have to know where the ideas are, waiting to be discovered. For your purposes as a student, the ideas are to be discovered within the academic literature; so that's where the search takes place. It's called reading. Reading is really just our way of searching the academic literature for ideas. That's where we start the invention process. Reading in this way; that is, for the purposes of discovering an interesting idea, is an essential part of the writing process. You will encounter the ideas of others, gain insight about burning questions in the field, see how others are grappling with various questions, and become more familiar with the kinds of ideas that are considered relevant in your discipline. So, begin your invention process by reading.

Another part of this process involves thinking. You are familiar with those moments while reading when you pause to ponder something you've just read; when you say things to yourself like "that's interesting" or "I never thought that before". These are potent moments, moments of discovery. Now you're onto something, zooming in on the territory of a potentially good idea for your own writing. Extend this process by having conversations with others, asking questions, making notes, brainstorming etc. so that you can wrestle with whatever it is that you found interesting in your readings. In this way, you will be making a commitment to that idea that is personal, and nothing will improve the

quality of your academic writing more than an authentic commitment to your topic.

Some other techniques to help you trigger ideas of your own include:

Brainstorming - simply put pen to paper and jot down any ideas that come to mind that relate to your broad subject area. Don't edit or limit yourself. Just let your imagination go and see what you discover

Free-writing - give yourself a 5-10-minute time limit and write continuously on some aspect of your general subject area. Don't edit. Don't censor yourself. Don't worry about spelling and grammar. Just write without stopping. This can reveal ideas that would otherwise lay hidden in your sub-conscious.

Generate questions about the subject – consider your subject from as many different points of view as you can think of and jot down notes/questions from these various perspectives.

Mind-mapping – if you are a visual thinker, clustering ideas in map form can help generate ideas. Simply start with a word in a bubble on your page and then make links to other words in bubbles. This can help you to find relationships and links between related concepts.

Many students struggle with the invention process for a variety of reasons. Some students have not had much practice inventing their own topics and are accustomed to simply following teacher instructions. Others lack the confidence in their own choices of topic, wondering if they are suitable for university-level writing. Others are anxious about deadlines and hesitant to devote too much time to reading and thinking about topics. They just want to start writing. This is understandable and good invention comes with practice. But the kinds of student essays that get generated from inadequate commitment to invention are often tedious to read, boring to write and contribute little to the learning process. Playing safe with formulaic essays on overdone, tired old topics is not the way to go.

So, where your writing assignments allow, spend time on this process. Read interesting things on the subject with an eye towards discovering ideas that interest you. Think about those ideas and have conversations with others about them. Brainstorm, ask questions, take notes and make a list of possible questions that emanate from those ideas. These questions then become little topic gems about which you can write interesting essays.

How We Can Help

Talking about your ideas is just about the most effective way to develop clearer thinking and discover the topics that genuinely interest you. That's precisely what we do at in Writing Support. We will listen to your ideas as you struggle to develop them. We will respond and ask you questions and challenge you to think more deeply on things. We will give non-judgmental feedback to help you further articulate and develop your ideas. This can be a very powerful ingredient in your process of invention and will help you to get clarity on your topic before you begin writing. Make an appointment with us very early in your writing process – soon after you get your assignment. Why struggle alone to “create” a topic or, worse, re-hash an old one, or worse again, get stuck trying to figure out what to write about when you can come talk to a Writing Support Consultant who will help you through that critical process.

Resources

Interesting [video from the Writing Centre at Dickinson College](http://youtu.be/3q0ob2-Ljd4) (beware the perils of formulaic essay outlining though!). Check it out here: <http://youtu.be/3q0ob2-Ljd4>