The First 5 Steps of the Writing Process

Although it is tempting to start writing soon after you receive an assignment, this would be a mistake. It pays off to put in the time to make sure all of your ideas are relevant, well-argued, and flow in a logical sequence. Formula for Success:

50% of time thinking, planning, and outlining + 50% of time writing and revising = 100% better writing!

We recommend that you follow the following 5 steps. These are pre-writing steps – by the time you finish Step #5 you should feel confident, organized, and ready to start writing.

Step 1: Understand the assignment question and the instructor’s expectations.

Read the assignment outline, and then look at it again. Then, look at it once more. Ask yourself:

- What is the topic?
- Do I have to generate a thesis?
- What kind of paper is this? Is this a persuasive essay (do I have to provide an opinion in order to sway the reader) or a literary analysis (do I have to demonstrate why my understanding/interpretation of a reading is justified)?
- What is the assigned length of the paper? 250 words is approximately 1 page.
- Do I need outside sources?
- What citation / referencing format do I have to follow (e.g. APA, MLA)?
- How formal is it? Am I allowed to use “I”?  
- When is it due?

Make sure that you fully understand what it is that you are being asked to do. If in doubt, contact your professor or Teaching Assistant (TA) for guidance. Do not go on to Step 2 if you are not 100% clear on the above questions – not being clear on the answer to any one of them could cost you a lot of time and marks, and lead to unnecessary stress!
Step 2: Write down what you already know about the topic.

You probably know much more about the topic than you think. Brainstorming is a great way to come up with possible ideas that you could use in your paper. There are many great ways to brainstorm, one of them being a Mind Map.

1. First take a piece of paper and write your topic in the middle of the page.
2. Next, start writing down your thoughts in no particular pattern. Write words or passages that pertain to your main idea in some way.
3. After you have exhausted all of your ideas, try to make connections between your ideas and see how they are interconnected.
4. If you get tired, take a break. When you are ready, look at it again and see if you have anything more to contribute.

Step 3: Gather information from several different sources.

Now that you have come up with some ideas on your own, it is time to see what the experts are saying about your topic. You can look at different places such as newspapers, books, journal articles to get ideas. If you gather information from the internet, make sure you look at reputable and reliable sites.

Using a search engine, such as the Ryerson University Library and Archives database or Google Scholar, will ensure the information you find comes from a trustworthy academic source. Remember to fully understand the expectations of the assignment – this was part of Step #1. The type of sources and the number of sources referenced will be stated in the assignment outline.

Still keep an open mind at this stage of the process – the more you search, the more you understand the topic – there may not be much information about what you had originally wanted to write about.

Step 4: Narrow your topic and compose a thesis statement

By now you have many different ideas you can work with. Try to choose something that interests you and you feel that you have enough information for the length of the assignment, i.e. the number of pages. From your topic, compose a thesis statement (phrased as a debatable statement), e.g.

**Topic:** Handguns
Research question: Should handguns be banned?

Thesis: Handguns should be banned.

Step 5 – Make a plan/outline

Once you have your thesis, make an outline of your essay in order to organize all of your ideas in a way that makes sense, before you formally start to write. This plan will be a visual guide to the information, and how it will be presented in your essay / writing assignment. You have already gathered information about your topic, now organize this information.

You will first need reasons to back up your thesis. Make your thesis into a question – this will generate your reasons. For example:

Question: Why should handguns be banned?

Answer: Handguns should be banned in Canada because:

1. There is no need for the general public to own handguns.
2. Guns contribute to criminal activity
3. Guns can cause unintentional injuries and deaths.

Each of these 3 reasons go back to the thesis statement, i.e. There is no need for the general public to own handguns, so therefore handguns should be banned in Canada.

Once you have your arguments, come up with supporting evidence for each one, e.g. for the first reason above:

a) There is no need for the general public to own handguns:
   - Guns are not necessary for public safety
   - Police & military = OK

Your outline should be very brief and in point form – you should be able to orally summarize your essay to another person by looking at your outline. If you get confused, you are not ready.

So, for these first 5 steps of the Writing Process, you have narrowed-down your topic, composed your thesis, and supported your ideas. You are finally ready to write your first draft. It may seem like a lot of work, but taking all of these extra steps will save time in the long run.