FREE-WRITING: GETTING STARTED
(Heuristic Devices)

"I don’t have anything to say" is a common complaint of students faced with the task of writing an essay. Several devices can help you find what you do have to say, what you want to write about, and what you want to say about it.

FREEWRITING

Freewriting means writing without stopping for a prescribed period of time, for instance ten minutes. You may stay on one subject, vacillate between subjects, or produce a stream-of-consciousness. You may write in single words, nonsensical successions of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. If you get stuck, you can repeat the last word you wrote until something else comes to mind. The content and form are not the point: the single, mechanical goal is to continue writing without stopping for a period of time.

The goal of freewriting is not the product of the writing but the process of doing the writing. Freewriting addresses the basic difficulty of finding words in one’s mind and putting them down on a piece of paper. Daily use of freewriting helps get over the block of getting started, over the worry of not having a good enough idea or the right words. Reading your freewriting immediately and underlining ideas you like or words that fit well together may generate ideas useful in essay writing.

KEEPING A JOURNAL

Writing everyday about what your mind is doing allows you to set down ideas and observations which may lend themselves later to full essay treatment. It also helps you to learn to use writing as a problem solving strategy. Possible journal starters might center on your feelings, for example what made you happy, sad, angry or exhilarated today; others might center on intellectual development, for example a new idea you were confronted with or a statement by an instructor that seemed to conflict with your previous knowledge.

BRAINSTORMING

After you have identified a broad general category on which you might like to write, or the instructor has offered a topic for general consideration, you need to generate lots of ideas about the topic. Brainstorming, whether a private
endeavor or a group activity, offers one of the simplest and quickest methods to find those ideas.

Without a thought to whether the idea is valid or the sentence complete or a word is capitalized or the grammar correct, begin to write whatever comes to mind. The ideas may come in sentences, words, or fragments, but they will come. Put as many as possible on paper. If, for example, (UPU) students is the general topic, perhaps the list of ideas will include:
- administration doesn’t care about students
- professors—some good, some bad
- cable building
- a lot of women
- not enough student activities
- always have park problems
- students who live on campus
- part-time students
- engineering students
- students who have to work
- honor students

Eventually, you will run out of ideas. By that time, however, you have ideally generated a volume of material, a conglomeration of ideas that you still want to evaluate in order to continue. Grouping similar ideas into categories may help you find a suitable topic.

CUBING

Cubing is a pre-writing exercise conceived and described by Elizabeth and Gregory Cowan in their book Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980). Essentially the process of cubing has two rules: 1. Use all six sides of the cube. 2. Move fast. Don’t allow yourself more than 3 to 5 minutes per side of the cube. The six directions follow:

1. Describe it. Look at the subject closely and describe what you see: colors, shapes, sizes, etc.

2. Compare it. What is it similar to and/or different from?

3. Associate it. What does it make you think of, remind you of? What comes to your mind? It can be similar things, or you can think of different things, different times, places, people. Just let your mind go and see what associations you have for this subject.

4. Analyze it. Tell how it is made or identify its parts. (You can make up this information if you do not really know!)
5. Apply it. Tell what you can do with it, how it can be used.

6. Argue for or against it. Take a stand. Use any kind of reasons you want to—rational, silly, or anywhere in between.

After you complete cubing, look at your written information to see if a particular point or a particular approach to the topic seems suitable for more extended writing. Creators of the process suggest that students often find the writing easier or more enjoyable on one side and that reaction should signal the perspective for future writing on the topic.