Worksheet: Before You Write—Pre-Writing

Use this worksheet to plan and implement your writing projects. Remember that all stages of the writing process, including pre-writing, are fluid. You'll move back and forth between each step as you refine and revise your ideas and focus.

TOPIC IDENTIFICATION: What is the topic you'll be writing about?

1. Brainstorming	2. Narrowing Focus	3. Selecting the Main Idea
Write out at least 5-6 different, broad topics you need/want to address (e.g. blogging for beginners or themes in a novel).	Narrow down your broad topics to more specific subjects (e.g. how to set up a WordPress account or the theme of family).	Write 1-2 sentences on what you want to convey to your readers (e.g. "Setting up a WordPress account can be done by anyone").
Tip: Write down any idea/topic that comes to mind during this phase. It's totally okay if something isn't relevant or seems too broad.	Tip: Try to pick 3-4 specific topics you might want to write about; that way, if you pick a topic that doesn't go anywhere, you have something to come back to later.	Tip: Write out sentences for the 3-4 specific topics you came up with in the previous step; that will give you a way to compare potential strengths and weaknesses for multiple main ideas.

TOPIC RESEARCH: What information exists regarding your topic?

1. The Basics	2. Research about Your Research	3. The Specifics
Find the basics for what you need to know about your topic.	Learn what other people have said about your topic.	Build on the information you found while doing your basic research.
Tip: Use the "5 W's" as a guide for getting the basics down—who, what, where, when, and why something is important.	Tip: If you're writing a blog post on freelance editing, read 4-5 other blogs to see what your peers are saying. If you're a student writing about the use of airplanes in World War II, see what 2-3 historians have said regarding the matter.	Tip: If you find yourself looking for details to *avoid* beginning the outline or first draft, take a break from researching and move on to the next stage. You can always come back if you need more data.

RESEARCH ORGANIZATION: Is the information you've found sorted and tagged in a manner that will enhance your writing process?

1. Sorting Paper Documents	2. Sorting Electronic Resources	3. Ensuring "Findability"
Systematically arrange any paper documents you might need in a file folder, notebook, or other container.	Systematically save websites, articles, and other electronic resources via bookmarks, a program like OneNote, or on your computer hard drive.	Tag all documents or resources with enough information so that you can find the original source again if necessary.
Tip: Sort articles by topic and then within each topic, sort by the document's publication date.	Tip: Save electronic resources in folders named thematically (e.g. an author's biography or an author's specific work).	Tip: Write down names of websites, books, or journals on paper documents to ensure you know where they came from if it's not immediately clear on the document itself.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS: What is the research "telling" you about your topic?

1. Big Ideas	2. Supporting Details & Facts	3. What's Missing
Identify 3-4 of the most significant ideas you've gathered from your research.	List 10-15 keywords or phrases that sum up the most convincing or interesting pieces of information you found that support your big ideas.	List 5-10 keywords or phrases that sum up what you *don't* know after your research.
Tip: Think thematically here—are you seeing specific topics or ideas come up repeatedly in the research?	Tip: Look for people, places, and ideas that enhance the understanding of your big ideas.	Tip: You can include supporting details or facts that might contradict some of your developing big ideas or beliefs about what you've found.

THE OUTLINE: What is the "map" for your writing project?

1. Main Idea/Argument	2. Supporting Evidence	3. Organization
Write the central idea or argument of your piece (e.g. "Setting up a WordPress blog can be done in 3 simple steps").	Write out the most important ideas/facts that support your main idea or argument.	Decide how you're going to present the information to your readers and use a numbered/bulleted outline format to list out chapters/sections/paragraphs.
Tip: The length of your thesis statement can vary according to the size and complexity of your writing project; however, for the outline, try to write only 1 sentence that sums up your main idea/argument.	Tip: Use 1-2 sentences at the *most* for the supporting evidence when writing the outline. You'll expand later, but this step is about creating the "map" for you to follow when you start writing.	Tip: The organization you choose should enhance the presentation of your main idea/supporting evidence (e.g. chronology for history). You want each section to build on previous sections so your readers can follow your train of thought.

Notes:

1. Do your future self a (huge) favor and keep your documents/research organized as you're researching.

   However, if you don't organize/sort as you go, do that before you begin working on the outline and *especially* before you start the actual writing project.

2. Don't commit yourself to ideas that aren't working for you in the pre-writing process. If you find you're not going anywhere, stop and go back to earlier steps to see if you can figure out where the breakdown is happening.

   Even if you have to return to brainstorming again, you're not really starting from "scratch." You've figured out something that doesn't work and can keep that knowledge in mind as you revise and refine.

3. The advice from Note #2 holds true for assigned topics as well. You might have a specific question or topic you need to write about, but the approach you take can always be tweaked or adjusted to work better.