



THE WRITING CENTER
The Charles Evans Inniss
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Bedford Building, 1045-A

Developing Ideas in an Academic Essay

Before you can even begin writing your academic essay there are a number of things that must happen:

1. What is the question your professor is asking you to answer? This sounds obvious, but often located in the question are numerous important clues that will trigger your imagination.

DO: Write down the assignment and spend some time thinking critically about what it means and what ways you could possibly develop this into your own essay. For example, if the assignment is “Compare and contrast the notion of liberty in _____”
What does it mean to “Compare”? “Contrast”?

DO: Look up key words in a dictionary or thesaurus, even ones you may think you know the definition of, this may help you clarify your ideas and give you clues for developing your thesis statement.

DONT: Freak out and think “I have no idea what this means! I’ll never be able to write this paper!” Baby steps are the key here.

DO: Free write! Once you understand the question, spend some time free writing about the topic in the texts. What are examples of “liberty” in text A? Is it financial independence? Is it breaking free from an oppressive parent? Is it traveling to far away lands? Usually there will be numerous ways to interpret and answer these questions, free writing will help you think through some of the possible ways you can do so.

DO: Get strategic! After you’ve made your lists ask yourself “What will be easier to do?” “What will be most interesting to do?” “Is it possible that everyone in my class will be answering this question the exact same way? Can I try to be a bit more creative?”

DON'T: Let yourself get overwhelmed! This is one of the fun parts of academic work! You’ve already done the hard part of reading and understanding the text, you haven’t yet started the difficult part of really writing in it, let your brain enjoy a little stress free brainstorming.

DO: Take a walk, go for a bike ride, talk it over with a friend. Get away from the computer. But keep this idea present, ask yourself some questions about your paper

while you're waiting for the train or cooking dinner. Many people say the best ideas come while you are doing something else.

