

UPDATED APA VERSION

*I wish I'd had
this when I
was in school!*

Ten Steps
to Help You Write
**BETTER
ESSAYS
& TERM
PAPERS**

THIRD EDITION

NEIL SAWERS

Writing for a Fast Moving World

www.fastmovingworld.com

The NS Group
Edmonton • Canada

Topic Criteria:

- In your study area
- Interests you
- Is of value
- Accepted by your instructor

come up with the right topic



For some people, this step is rarely a problem. For others, coming up with the right topic is challenging and can create mental blocks. We hope to change that by providing a pathway to assist you.

Who selects the topic?

The topic is either:

1. Chosen after discussion between you and your instructor
2. Determined by your instructor
3. Selected by you alone

If your instructor has determined the topic, your job is to think about that topic, research it and come up with a thesis - i.e. what you want to prove about the topic.

If you're choosing the topic

When the choice of topic has been left completely or partly with you, how should you choose? Whenever possible, your topic should meet four basic criteria:

- *Be in your area of study*
- *Interest you* - i.e. you're excited about it - you enjoy it
- *Be of value* - i.e. you have something valuable to communicate
- *Accepted as suitable by your instructor*

Sometimes you know exactly the topic you want to cover. Other times you're not sure, don't know, or you're blocked. We've all been there. I suggest that you literally go on an exploration to uncover that topic, using some very practical techniques along with some remarkable tools.

*Please do not let fear
stop you from trying
these tools & techniques*

*Explore to
uncover the topic*

*Relax and give
yourself time
to think*

PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR EXPLORING A TOPIC

Before we begin, a reminder about fear. In Step One, “Be Proactive,” on page 5, I stressed the importance of not letting “fear” stop you from doing things that make a difference. The techniques and tools that follow, if you use them, will make a difference in the quality of your efforts and your satisfaction at doing your best. Please do not be afraid to try them. They work.

Thinking

The first practical technique is your own thinking. By that I mean thinking while relaxed.

We’re usually so busy that we don’t believe there’s enough time to sit back and think about what we’re trying to accomplish. Many successful people, however, regularly take breaks from what they’re doing simply to focus their attention on new subjects, or areas that they’re concerned about.

I recommend that you give yourself some quiet time to reflect. Take a walk, sit back at home, go have coffee somewhere - and let your mind flow free. Ideas have a chance to surface, patterns start to emerge, relationships begin to form.

Always carry a notebook so that you can jot your ideas down and not forget them.

While you’re thinking, consider your reader. What is it your reader is expecting? (We cover the reader more fully in *Step 7 - Write with your reader in mind.*)

Time to think like this is valuable at any stage; whether you’re researching the topic, wondering what your thesis will be, or simply organizing and writing your presentation.

Explore with pre-writing

Explore through research

Exploration tools

- Brainstorming
- Mind mapping
- Rapidwriting

Pre-writing

Pre-writing is a second practical way to explore. Pre-writing simply means doing some exploratory writing in the topic area. Many teachers encourage this because, like thinking, it can open up your mind to other possibilities. Things you write down can jell into a topic that can seem promising (or not) and uncover ideas, insights and options that you may not have considered before.

How much time should you take for this “up front” work? That depends on how many hours, days or weeks you have for the whole assignment. I suggest you build in time to pre-write - even if it’s only half an hour to an hour. Increase the time based on the size and scope of the assignment.

Research

A third practical way is through research. Research, which we’ll cover more fully in Step 5, can also open up new ideas, send you off in a different direction, or confirm where you’re headed. Is a topic worth pursuing? Is there enough material? Research may provide an answer.

TOOLS TO HELP YOU EXPLORE

The following tools will fully support your efforts, not just in school or college, but in whatever you do. They are:

- Brainstorming
- Mind mapping
- Rapidwriting

These three tools make use of the random and often remarkable ways in which our minds come up with different thoughts and ideas. They allow us to get these thoughts and ideas down on paper, and in the case of mind mapping, display them in an organized manner. By using these tools in your exploration process, you will most likely become clear:

- a. About your topic,
- b. What you want to prove about it, and
- c. How to organize/outline it for writing.

Brainstorming rules:

- Write down every idea
- No censorship
- No judgment
- No evaluation
- No editing

*Evaluate each idea
then pick the topic with
the best potential*

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a freewheeling session, by yourself or with others, in which you focus on a topic or area you wish to examine more closely. In this session you let every idea about the topic come up, and, no matter how far fetched or crazy it seems, you write it down.

Start with a clear desk and a clean sheet of paper. If you prefer a chalkboard, flip chart or computer, use that instead.

If two or three of you are working together, it helps if one person acts as a recorder, making sure that everything the group thinks of is written down.

Do's and don'ts while brainstorming

- Do write down each idea, one after the other
- Don't censor yourself
- Don't evaluate or judge anything
- Don't edit anything
- If friends or classmates assist you, don't let them censor, judge or edit either

Review the results

Once the ideas are down:

- Evaluate what you've got
- Eliminate those ideas that don't work
- Select the topic with the most potential from those that remain

Brainstorming is a great way to begin exploring options, especially when ideas are given unrestricted flow. Combining this technique with mind mapping, however, can really make a difference to your results.

Mind mapping:

- Write down main topic area in middle of page
- Create a branch for each different thought or idea
- Add ideas that pertain to existing branches to those branches
- If it's a totally new idea, create a new branch

Mind mapping

Mind mapping is one of the most valuable tools I have ever come across, not just for writing, but for planning and exploration of all kinds.

With mind mapping:

- The topic area you're exploring is written down in the middle of a sheet of paper or chalkboard.
- Every thought, every idea about that topic, or area of interest from which a topic might come, goes down on the paper or chalkboard as branches on a map. (The key points that come out of your notes, your research, what you've read - all get added to the branches.) It is these branches that give order and flow to your random thoughts and ideas.
- Each branch represents similar thoughts and ideas. Any new thought or idea pertaining to an existing branch is added to that branch.
- A totally new idea, with no relation to an existing branch, receives a branch of its own.

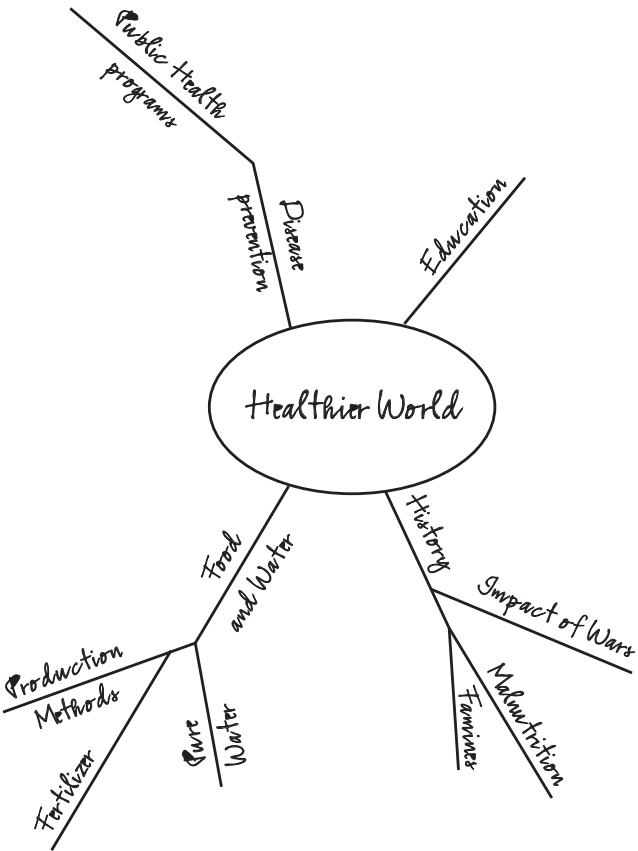
The result is like looking at a tree from above - you see a trunk with all kinds of branches spreading from it, each with its own categories of information.

Once your thoughts, ideas, notes, etc., are down on paper, you can analyze what you've got. Which are the most important branches? What connections are there between branches? Is there a logical place from which a topic could come?

See over the next few pages how these mind maps are created and evolve.

Initial mind map

- Subject in middle (healthier world)
- Branches (history, food & water, education, disease prevention)



Mind Maps® is a Registered Trademark of the Buzan Centres - used here with enthusiastic permission.

APPLICATION

I'm going to give you two practical examples. The first uses the mind map approach we've just covered. The second uses a unique way of using Post-it® Notes created by 3M company. It's called "Using sticky notes."

Mind map approach

Let's assume that as part of a sociology program you have to write something about the improved health of the world compared to the turn of the last century. The topic is in that area but you're unsure what it will be. Here's how to begin using the mind map process:

Take a clean sheet of paper, or chalkboard and in the middle, write down the area you want to explore. In this case write "healthier world."

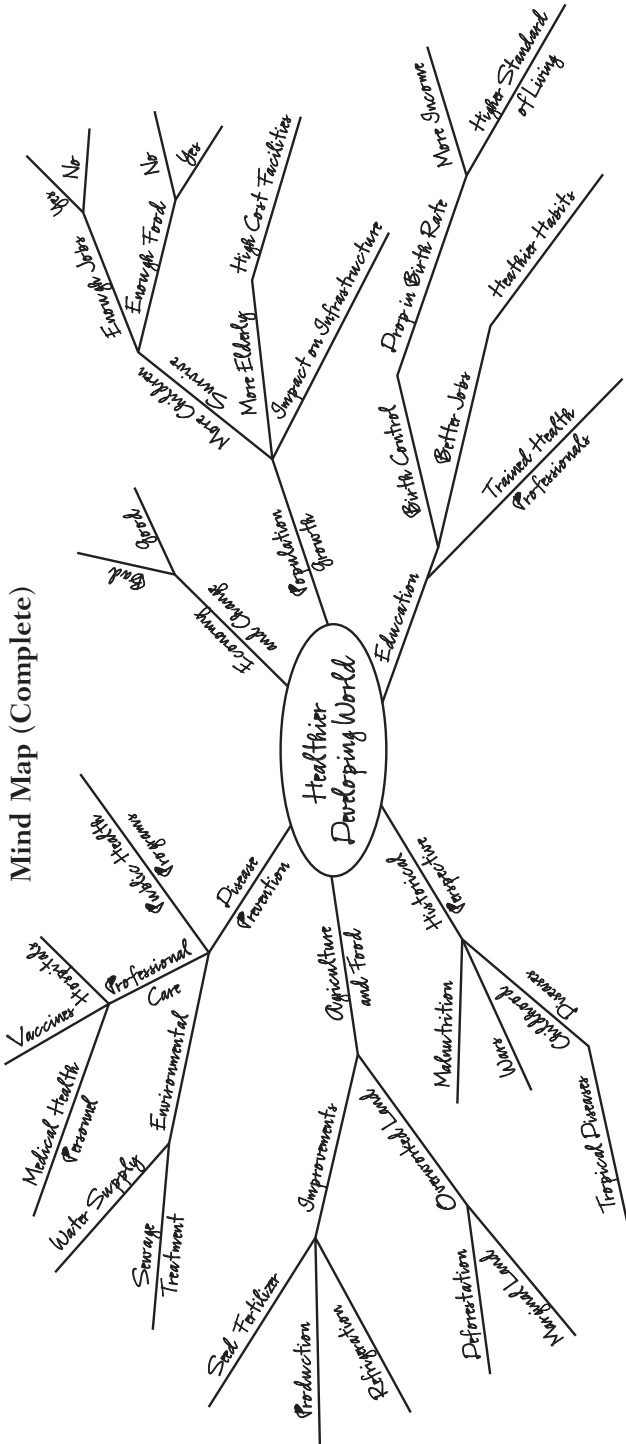
Immediately your mind starts to conjure up thoughts about health in its many permutations. Because it's such a large subject you decide to focus on health in the developing world.

What health problems did countries in the developing world face? That historical perspective is your first branch - and some of the sub topics that you might come up with include malnutrition, tropical diseases, childhood diseases, dysentery, etc.

With your pen or chalk, you place this first branch off the central core. Now you brainstorm other areas which may require new branches, or additions to branches you've already created.

- There's a *disease prevention* branch - every thought or idea about how diseases were prevented over the last 100 years goes down here; vaccines, better professional care, purifying the water, controlling sewage. These measures helped lessen death and disease, creating a healthier population with more children surviving and older people living longer.

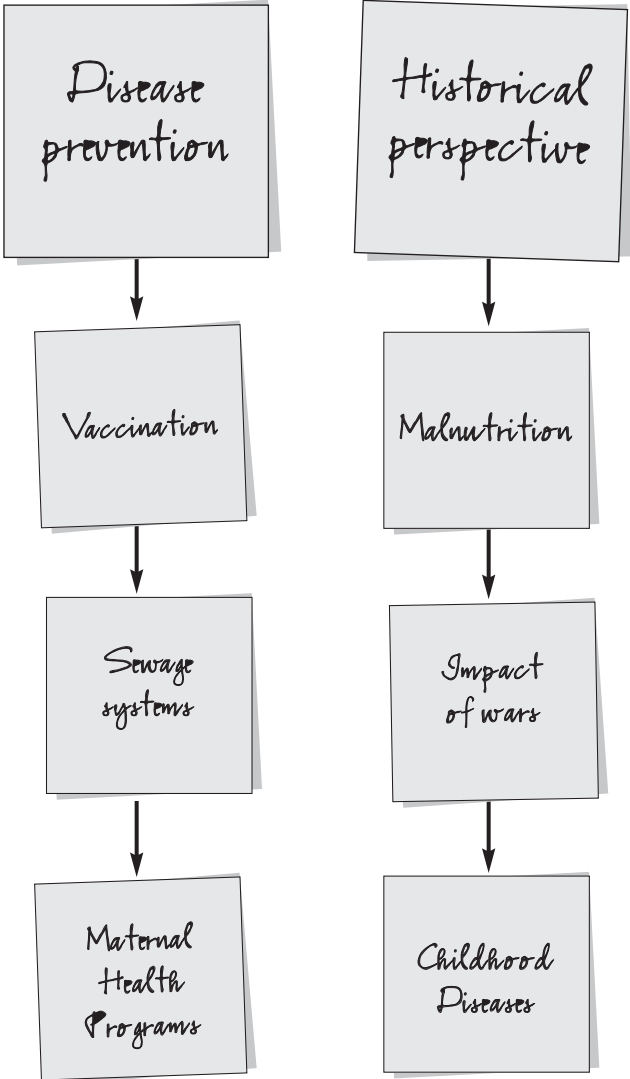
Mind Map (Complete)



- You recognize that *education* played a major role - so that's a new branch. Included in that branch are public health programs, the training of medical professionals and other health workers, environmental health, etc.
- There's an *agriculture & food* branch. The century has seen dramatic improvements in agriculture and food production. There's better seed, fertilizers and production methods creating more food. On the other hand there's land that's unable to support a growing population because of poor quality soils, flooding, lack of water, erosion from deforestation, etc.
- There's a *population* branch. There are more children because of vaccines, better hygiene and better food & water. On the other hand, lower death rates have increased the population. In some countries the food supply can't keep up, leading to malnutrition, starvation and death.
- There's an *economy* branch. How has the increased population affected the economy? Are there more jobs? Are jobs scarce? Has it been a drain on national resources?

As you let your mind wander, you'll find that your ideas come from all kinds of different places. Add those ideas to the branches you've created. If it's a totally new idea, remember to create another branch.

Using sticky notes



Using sticky notes

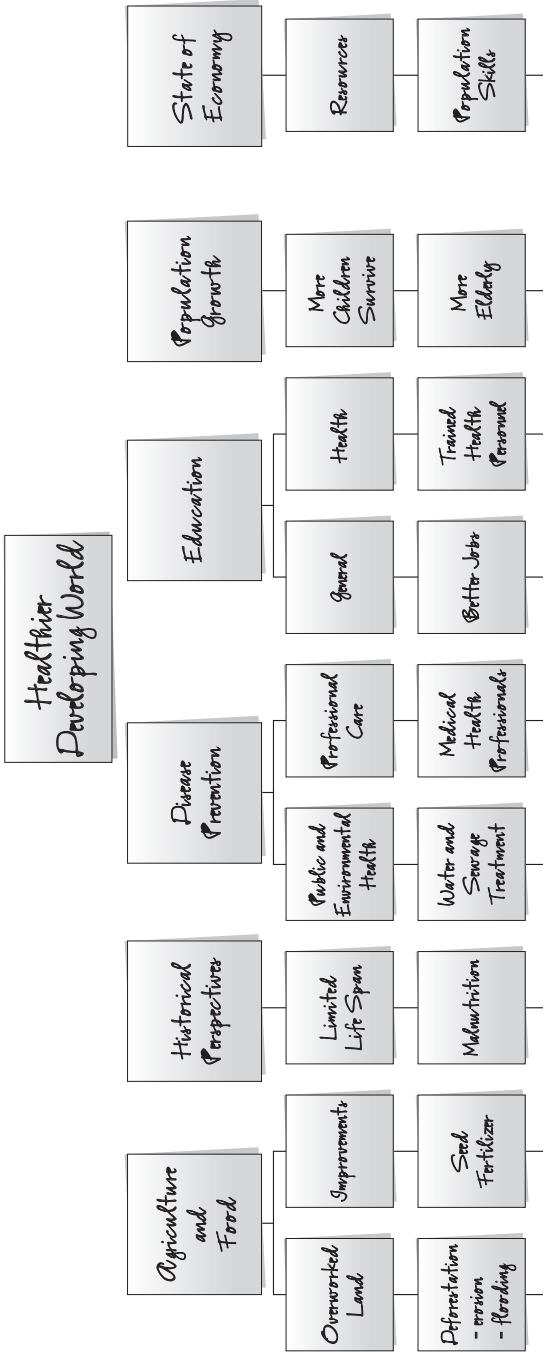
From the previous example we write down each key point on a sticky note. We then put it on a surface like a flip chart or wall. Flip charts work well because the size of the paper gives plenty of space.

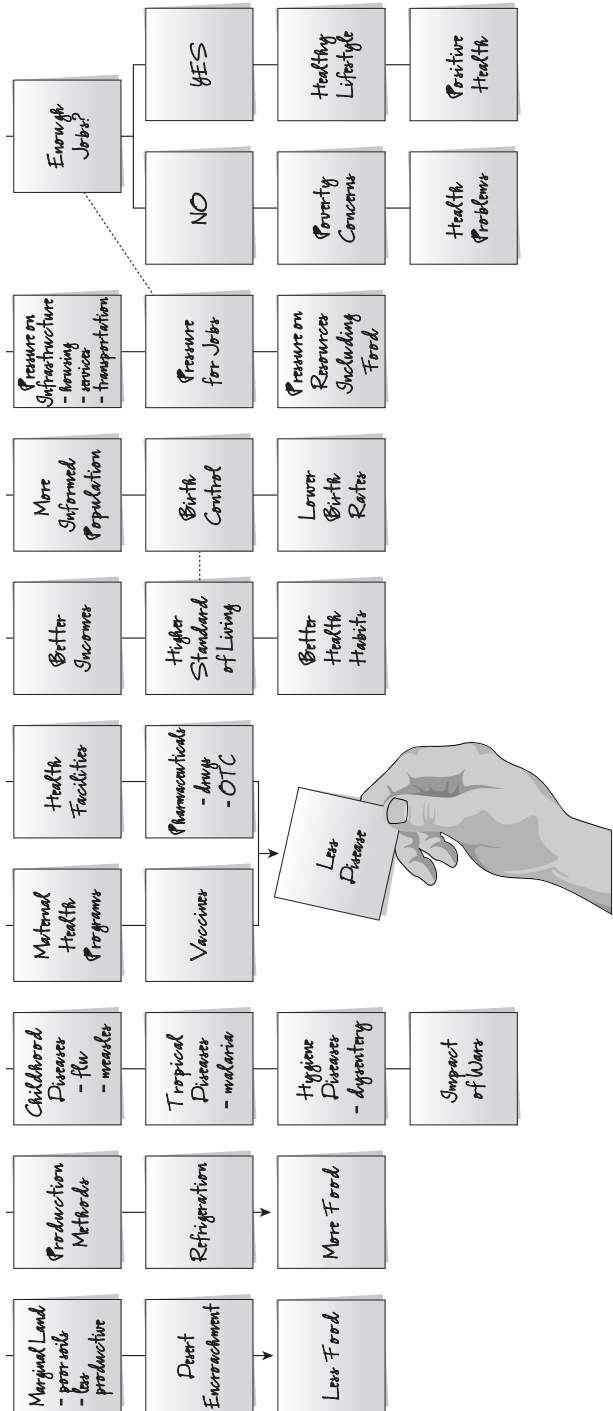
Now, instead of branches you create rows or columns, each row or column representing a branch. Personally, I find columns easier to use.

- At the top of the column, place a general heading of what that column is about
- Every sticky note pertaining to that column goes underneath it
- Create a new column if it's a different area altogether
- Use as many columns as there are branches

On the following double page, you can see what happens with all the information when using sticky notes.

Using Sticky Notes (Complete)





Sticky notes have incredible flexibility. You can move them around easily to help you plan, review, create flow, etc.

Analyze your mind map:

- Look for patterns
- What bridges could you create?
- What conclusions could you draw?

Now here's the magic of using sticky notes. Because of the unique quality of the product, you can:

- Move a sticky note around
- If something doesn't fit in one column and belongs in another, you can move it there
- Move items around in an individual column until you're satisfied that the items are in a sequence that you can work with

Conventional mind map system or use sticky notes?

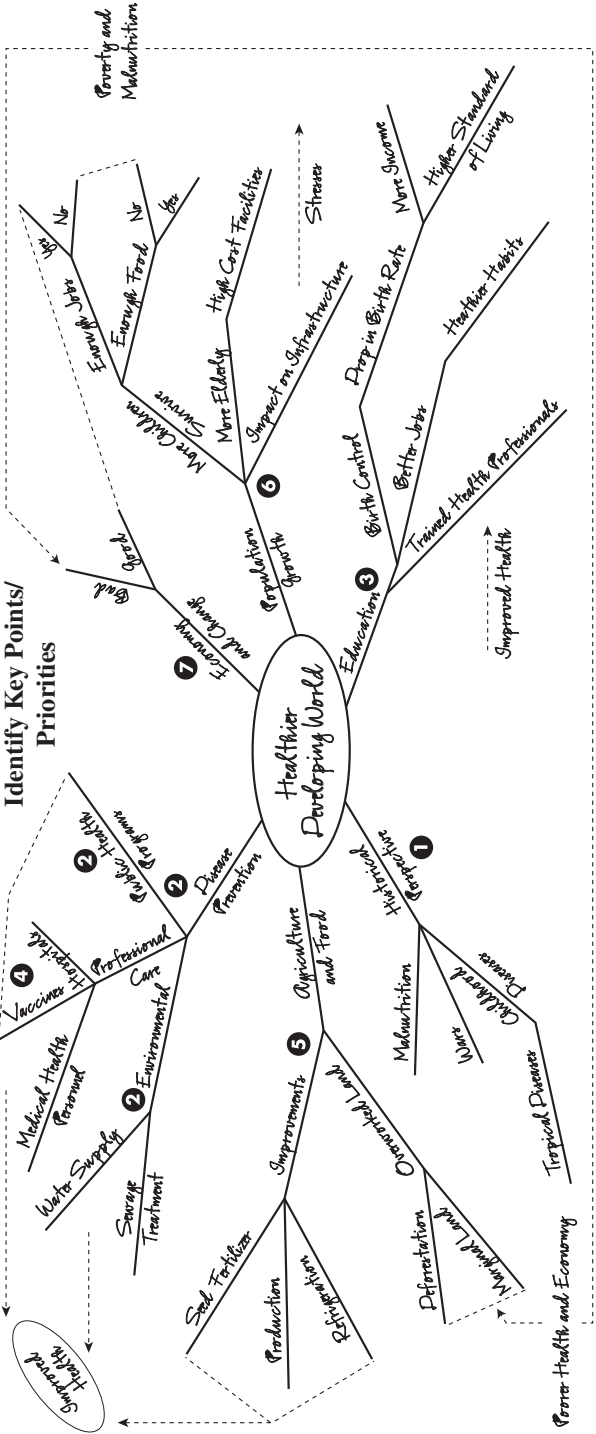
For me, the connections are more visible on the conventional system, especially when I'm dealing with only a few branches. If you have a lot of branches, however, with many sub headings, sticky notes may be more manageable.

Mind map analysis

Once the information is down, analyze what you've got. Look for patterns. How does one branch (or column if you use sticky notes) relate to another? What bridges could you create? What other connections are there? What conclusions could you draw?

In my experience, when you create a mind map, the important things seem to jump out at you. You start to see how and where all your thoughts, ideas and research connect together. A direction for the topic and what you want to prove about it, shows up.

This helps you determine the sequence of your essay or term paper and often gives you ideas and connections, even conclusions, that you might not have considered.



You may also see where too much emphasis has been applied in one area and too little in another. If one area looks thin, you might need more research, or, question whether to go down a particular path.

Identify key points and/or priorities

Next, identify the key points, or priorities. In which sequence should they be discussed? By numbering them you give yourself the natural, step by step, linear sequence that you can work with when writing your first draft.

Here's how that might work using the health care example. If you look at the mind map on the opposite page, you will see that I have numbered certain areas because to me they are the key points or priorities with which to deal. I see "historical perspectives" as the first priority, followed by "disease prevention" - notably basic areas like public health programs and environmental concerns such as water supply and treatment of sewage.

If we assume that our topic is "The impact of health care in the developing world over the last 100 years," here are the key points in sequence, as identified on the mind map:

1. Historical health problems
2. Importance of disease prevention in improving health, specifically public health & environmental programs
3. Public education - in both health and general terms and its benefits
4. Health care resources - people and resources
5. Improved agriculture/food production
6. Impact of population growth - stress on infrastructure, land, transportation, etc.
7. Impact of changes on the economy

It is this seven key point sequence that you can now use in developing or organizing your material so as to write your first draft.

*Try **rapidwriting** to uncover fresh thoughts and ideas about your topic...it only takes a few minutes*

Rapidwriting rules:

- Write nonstop
- No censoring
- No correcting
- No judgment

Review what you wrote:

- Highlight key points to add to your mind map/organizing

Rapidwriting

I'd like to introduce you to one more tool. It's called rapid-writing (or freewriting) and it can be very useful in giving you fresh ideas about your topic.

Although similar to brainstorming, with rapidwriting you let the mind flow with the topic, doing anything it wants, writing down insights, making comparisons - all without limitation. Nothing is taboo. You can make judgments and evaluations; you can express your views in the moment.

In rapidwriting you write, nonstop, for a fixed period of time. Here are the rules:

- Give yourself a time frame - it might be five minutes, 15 minutes, half an hour - to write about your topic. (Some believe you can only focus for a few minutes. I find that I can go 15 minutes or more when I hit my stride. Whatever works for you is fine.)
- Don't stop - just let the words and ideas flow
- Don't censor yourself
- Don't decide if what you've written is good or bad
- Don't change anything, don't correct, don't say, "I shouldn't have written that!"

When the time is up, examine what you've written. I am amazed at the wealth of information that can be generated from this simple exercise. Underline or highlight the key points and add this new information to your mind map, or however you organize your work.

Summary

These techniques - brainstorming, mind mapping, rapid-writing - can be used at any time for many different purposes. They are extremely valuable in helping you get clear about where you're going.

Is your topic viable?

- Check it
- Test it
- Will it fly?
- Are there holes big enough to drive a truck through?



IS THE TOPIC VIABLE?

Before you finalize your topic, make sure it's viable. In business they test something by making a prototype or giving a new service a trial run prior to committing full resources to a project. An example from the aircraft industry is the "chicken test." When aircraft take off or land, birds are sometimes sucked into the intakes of jet engines. Manufacturers have to be certain that an engine will keep running if birds are a problem. So, they fire dead chickens into the intake of an engine prototype. If the engine continues to perform satisfactorily, the project continues.

Another wonderful phrase I heard for reviewing a film script could also apply: "Are there holes big enough in your topic to drive a truck through?"

What test will you apply to your topic to see if it's viable?

Is what I'm working on good enough to fly? Can I drive a truck through it? Do I have enough research to back up my opinions or to challenge them? Can I develop this topic in enough depth or am I wasting my time? By discovering any shortcomings early, you save yourself time. Then, you can start looking for a fresh angle to your topic, or a new topic entirely.

*Consider limiting
(or expanding) your
topic so as to focus better
on a specific area*

*How might you
narrow down and define
your topic effectively?*

LIMITING (OR EXPANDING) THE TOPIC

You could write a book on some topics. On the other hand, you may find that you have to expand the topic for your discussion to be of value.

I'm going to concentrate on the need to limit a topic - a topic that might otherwise cover too much ground. By determining limits, you narrow the focus. This lets you fully explore and develop a specific area.

For example, when we discussed mind mapping we suggested a topic for sociology about the improved health of the world today compared to 1900. Since it was such a broad topic, we narrowed it down to "health in the developing world."

Even that's a very broad topic. We could narrow it down even more by considering only the health of "children" in the developing world.

We could further limit the topic by discussing "the impact of vaccination programs" on these children.

You can also narrow down a specific assignment given by your instructor. Suppose your English essay was "Hamlet: insane or just faking it?" The focused version might be "What does Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia tell us of the central character and his state of mind?"

In summary, the reason for narrowing or limiting a topic is because the scope is usually too broad to allow more detailed analysis and discussion.

*If a topic won't fit,
don't try to force it*

*Do you know what
your instructor expects
from you?*

Assume nothing

*Be proactive and
find out*

Caution flag! Too often students believe a topic has to look a particular way even if it doesn't seem or feel right. As a result, many students find themselves locked into a difficult position where the only way out is to try and force things to fit. Avoid this by doing what you think is right, and supporting your writing with research, etc.

WHAT DOES MY INSTRUCTOR EXPECT FROM ME?

Students often complain that they get an assignment from their instructor but are not told what the instructor expects from them. This usually shows up after an assignment is done with instructor comments like “This is not what the assignment was about.” Or, “Why didn't you do this?”

Two things could be going on here. Either you misunderstood what the instructor was after, or, the instructor did not clarify what was wanted from the assignment.

How can you prevent this? The worst thing is to make assumptions about what you think your instructor intends. We all know the problems caused by wrong assumptions.

The answer is *be proactive*. If you're not certain what your instructor expects, ask. The best instructors encourage it.