

After you have determined your purpose and audience, it's time to think more specifically about the topic. Maybe the specific topic has already been assigned to you, or maybe you already know what you'd like to write about. Or, maybe you're just not sure where to start. Wherever you're at, the following invention exercises can help you to get started with your topic. With practice, you will discover which of these exercises works best for your own writing process. But, don't limit yourself to just one! Invention techniques may be used in conjunction with each other. For example, you may use listing to decide which topic to write about, and then use freewriting, mapping, or outlining to think of more specific ideas.

Listing

If you're having trouble deciding on a topic, listing is often helpful. Just take ten to twenty minutes to list any topic that you can think of. This is a brainstorming time, so jot down any topic that enters your mind. Later, you can decide whether the topic is appropriate. For now, the goal is to come up with as many ideas as possible. Below is an example for writing about a personal experience.

Graduation—speech, scary, fun, celebration, sad and happy at same time

Joel being born—was the "big brother" for the first time/started to realize that what I did could be an example for him

First Communion—St. Henry's, year of classes, nice teachers

First time I drove my car—long wait/driving lessons/failing the first time/lessons with Dad/with freedom comes responsibility

Christmas—oyster stew and chili/Grandma and Grandpa hiring a Santa/thirty people, twelve under seven years old/passing out the presents

16th Birthday—close friends, presents, feeling like an adult for the first time

If you already have a topic in mind, you can also make a list about that specific topic. When you do that, sometimes it helps to look for common themes among the items on your list. Finding these common themes can sometimes help you to organize the paragraphs of your paper.

Freewriting

Freewriting involves taking a few minutes to write down whatever you can think of about the topic. During freewriting, you don't need to be concerned about spelling or grammar. Simply write down whatever comes to mind. You may end up with some valuable ideas for your paper! Below is an example of freewriting for an assignment that asked students to write about a personal experience.

I'll never forget what it was like when my sister Anna was born. I remember almost everything, from waiting from the phone to ring to not being able to sleep the night before. Grandma and Grandpa coming to visit...Grandma making homemade stews and apple crisp...the changing leaves and the crisp October air...what it felt like to look at Anna's little fingers for the first time...seeing Mom in the hospital bed and seeing her in a different light!

Outlining

If you already have a topic in mind, outlining can help you to organize your ideas. Outlining often works well in conjunction with another invention exercise, such as mapping or freewriting. The example below is an outline for an assignment that required students to write about a personal experience. The topic for this outline is graduation.

I. Getting Ready

- A. Nervousness about speech—how to let people know how important they've been to me*
- B. Mom's talk while I was getting dressed*
- C. Grandma and Grandpa getting in to town*
- D. Kristin's call—"What are you wearing?"*

II. Ceremony

A. Giving Speech

- 1. hands shaking*
- 2. microphone sounded loud!*
- 3. people clapping*

B. Mr. Hall talking

1. *"We are the future."*
2. *promise of what's to come*
3. *people throwing beach ball around—everyone trying not to laugh*

C. Post-Graduation party

1. *Theme: Come Sail Away*
2. *Congratulations! We did it!*
3. *Laughing at the hypnotist*
4. *Will we ever be together like this again?*
5. *Scary*

D. Conclusion: "The Best Years of Your Life...So Far"

1. *realized this is true; glad we celebrated through ritual of graduation*
2. *reflected on what happened and what will happen*
3. *new friends and old friends—quote from song*

When the writer moves on to step three, writing about the topic, the outline will be helpful in moving from one idea to the next.

Mapping

Mapping involves creating a simple map of your topic. The example below is a map of the topic of graduation. Notice that the topic is circled in the center of the page, and the writer branches off with things related to that topic. This is one way to generate ideas about a potential topic. The related topics could eventually turn into paragraphs in a paper about graduation.

