Writing: How Do I Get Started?

Deadlines are one thing, but do you feel lost when it comes to knowing where to begin with a writing assignment? You’re not alone! Here are some tips to start you off.

Break down the prompt
What are the main requirements: topic(s), text(s), page count / word count, # of sources, type of sources (academic vs. non-academic)? Make a checklist to consult as you work. Circle and break down key words like discuss, analyze, compare/contrast, etc. If you’re confused, check your understanding with your instructor or TA during office hours.

Brainstorm sources and evidence
Make a list of possible books, articles, etc. you could use to answer the prompt (tip: check out the Knight Library subject area guides for help). Some writers keep a “paper notes” or “quotes” catch-all document to collect all relevant quotes, plus page numbers and author citations, as you read.

Prewriting
Draw concept maps and word clouds to start thinking about the connections between topics, themes, and key terms, like the example to the right.

Freewriting
Freewriting helps you get information down on the page without worrying about editing. Set a timer for a specific amount of time (5 min., 15, etc.) and start writing about your topic. Bullet points & incomplete sentences are fine - just don’t stop until time’s up!

When finished, go through your freewriting and circle or underline key phrases, concepts, and arguments to start transforming your ideas into an essay.

Be a Journalist: The Six Q’s
Like any good reporter, ask yourself: who, what when, why, where, and how? These will shift depending on your assignment’s field and genre, so these are just a few examples. It can help to conference with a study partner or classmate to talk through these ideas.

- Who? Who are key figures or characters? Who is your audience? Who’s affected?
- What? What is the topic and its significance? What is the essay’s purpose?
- When? When did the topic become relevant? How does the time period affect this topic?
- Where? Where does the topic occur? What contexts (culture, geography, field) matter?
- Why? Why is this issue/topic important? Why does it exist? Why should people care?
- How? How does the topic appear in texts/events? How do we know it’s important?

Finally...don’t forget to make time for writing! Getting started as early as possible is key.