

## Beginning a Writing Project

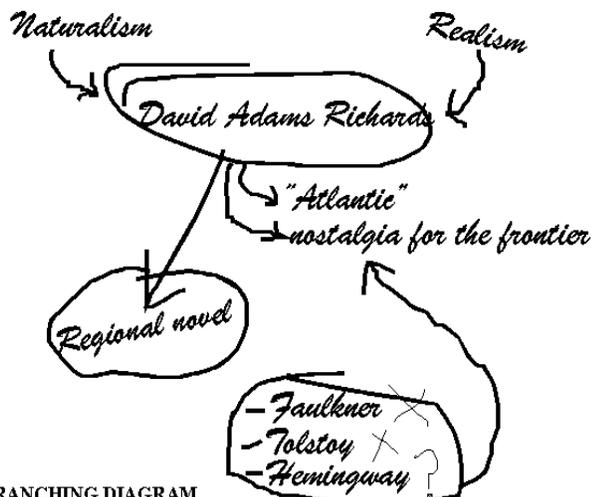
Even if you have been assigned a topic to write about, you may have difficulty starting your project. Before you begin to organize and arrange an argument or gather and select information, you should explore your subject and discover the limits of your knowledge and the implications of your assumptions. You will do this mentally as soon as you begin to think about your topic, but it is useful to record your thoughts, amassing ideas and sketching out possible lines of argument. Such preliminary explorations, sometimes called **prewriting**, are not a waste of time. Skilled writers working on familiar tasks can plot their whole approach so that, after prewriting, little remains for them to do but to type out and edit their compositions.

### 1. Branching and Mapping

Several prewriting exercises are popular. Branching is the informal process by which we generate clusters of related ideas and link them visually. This is the beginning of any assignment requiring research. Idea clusters are not reliable guides to the relationships between concepts; they can be the result of misunderstanding, ignorance, and confusion. At this stage of the project, however, creating ideas is more important than critiquing them. The best tools for branching are pen and paper. You can use a computer program, but most of these, even those designed to help creativity, are more confining than the traditional tools.

### 2. Creating a Topic

Developing a topic is always challenging. Although instructors in many courses will provide you with a choice of topics, it will still be up to you to turn your **topic** into a thesis. You may also be encouraged to select your own topics. Begin by branching, and then try an additional exercise: **freewriting** or **nonstop writing**, as it is sometimes called. Take ten minutes and write, without pausing, using your branching diagram as a guide if you wish. Do your best to fill up at least a page, and then stop and criticize your work.



BRANCHING DIAGRAM

To begin, write a word or phrase describing your subject in the centre of the page, and then add branches for each related idea that occurs to you. Develop branches until you run out of connected ideas, and then return to the central subject and start again. This periodic return to the centre is called **looping**, and it reflects the course of most arguments. Essays create new ideas about a subject by relating various smaller points to a central question or proposition. Branching or looping achieves the same thing in a loose, diagrammatic form.

This technique will ensure that you begin writing; if you work with enough concentration, you may even produce a useful first draft of your essay. It will be a rougher first draft than you are used to, perhaps, but it will also be available far earlier in the composition process than even a very rough draft usually is. During the course of your freewriting you will probably begin to establish your thesis.

### 3. Transforming Freewriting into Formal Writing

The first thing to eliminate from your writing is, oddly enough, yourself. You *are* your writing, from your reader's point of view; everything you state is your judgment, guided and supported by your research. There is no need restate these obvious points; indeed, there is no room for such repetition. In your rough work you may have included many little markers emphasizing your own voice: "*I believe,*" "*It seems to me.*" In a formal work these comments are obtrusive: remove them and use the space to clarify logical transitions.

You may find strengthening the links between ideas especially challenging as you revise. Often, your own persona is a rallying point for ideas in informal writing: your tone alone may establish connections between ideas. Be explicit and precise about relationships in more formal work: your goal is to present a convincing case for your interpretation of a set of facts rather than to present the emotion accompanying that interpretation. In the pre-writing phase, before you have begun to work on the material that you will actually present to your reader, you are not bound by the necessity of presenting a logical, complete, and completely-documented argument. Use your freedom—

1. to *develop* a topic, creating your own or limiting and defining an assigned one;
2. to *discover* your ideas about a subject through branching and looping;
3. to *voice* your own opinions;
4. and to *research* your topic.