We have an assignment to write. We’ve understood the topic and done some reading, but when we think about how to start writing our mind is still a blur. We’ve can’t think how to begin; and even worse, though we know something about the main ideas of the subject area, we can’t think how to respond, how to organise and structure the assignment.

This is a general problem, not just a personal one! Most of us find planning and beginning to write an assignment the most difficult part of study. Realising that “it isn’t only me” who feels this way is a beginning; and recognising that there may be effective ways of getting started can definitely reduce the pain, and help us do better work.

**Getting Started – Pre-Writing…**

Before doing any formal writing, there are two useful steps we can take:

1. **Brainstorming:** we jot down on paper, quickly, in no particular order, all the things we know about our topic. This doesn’t have to be a formal, sitting ‘at desk’ activity. It’s often best if it isn’t:

   brainstorming can be effective when done on impulse, on a scrap of paper or in a memo book. However we go about it, brainstorming will help us build up a first view of the field we’re looking at.

For example, imagine we are doing a Marketing assignment which asks us to investigate the characteristics of consumer markets. We have looked at one or two of the standard Marketing reference books, but their discussion of the topic seems to be only lists, without much structure. Thinking about what we’ve read and what we know, we initially brainstorm the following points we think important, in no particular order:

- **People (populations)**
  - (metropolitan/rural)
- **Age groups (children, teenagers, middle-aged, mature)**
- **Gender**
- **Consumer motivation, buying behavior**
- **Reference group influences (work, family, peer)**
- **Consumer income**
  - (social class)
- **Consumer psychology**
- **Family life cycle (singles, couples, single parents, full nesters, empty nesters, older singles)**
- **Culture**
2. **Mind Mapping**: the second pre-writing step is to make a ‘mind map’, a picture with the topic in a circle at the center, the most general ideas in circles around the topic, and the other issues arrayed around the main ideas, linked together by lines where we see connections.

The advantages of mind maps are that they:
- use keywords rather than sentences;
- use both sides of our brain (our left brain remembers the words, our right brain the shape);
- present a *schematized* picture, a form in which information and ideas are easier to understand.

Continuing our example: we’ve brainstormed aspects of consumer markets. Now the problem is to find some structure here. We decide that the central issues in consumer markets might be population factors, patterns of consumer spending, and factors which motivate consumers to spend. Thus we mind map as follows, modifying the brainstormed points. We don’t add too much detail, such as male/female for gender, or children, teenagers, young adults etc. for age groups; but we do show some cross connections, such as gender to buyer psychology:
Starting to Write

Outlining

In the example, our mind map has proved helpful, because it suggests a structured outline. The outline will continue to use keywords, and should be in dot point form, written at the three ‘levels’ suggested by the mind map. We can also show our ‘hyperlinks’ dotted to the right of the text:

**Consumer Markets**

- consumer populations
  - geographical
    - metropolitan (inner city, suburb)
    - rural
  - gender
    - female
    - male (etc.)
  - age groups (children, teenagers, etc.)

- consumer spending
  - social class
  - income/expenditure
    - singles
    - couples (etc.)

- consumer motivation
  - culture
  - buyer behavior/psychology
  - reference groups (work, family, peer)

Making an outline based on a mind map is often a good place to begin writing, because we have a starting point – and a starting point is often the problem, since it is difficult for our mind to make something out of … nothing!

Now that we have an outline, we know, broadly, what we’re going to write.

The Opening & the Conclusion

As we’re going to note in the next section, on Research, it’s often best to start writing the end of the report first! Looking over our example outline, we have the strong feeling that without knowing the consumer market, no organization should begin product design and marketing; and we realize that this would be a good point to conclude with – and other points for the conclusion will occur to us as we write.

But we are also looking for a way of introducing our paper: we’re looking for a ‘hook’ which will catch the reader’s interest, and introduce our topic. We may not find it at this point, but we let our mind come back to the problem from time to time. (We think to start with that a good hook might involve an amusing marketing mismatch, like trying to sell wood-fired heaters to people living in Darwin!)

Further Research – Starting to Write

After writing our outline, we’re conscious that we need to do further research. Although we tend to think of this activity as ‘reading’, it is also the beginning of writing. We take the following steps:

1. **Making Notes, Gathering Quotes**: As we look at reference material, we take outline notes, and collect useful quotations; this ensures that our minds are positive and active! (See pamphlets Doing Library Research, and Reading, for more on this.) This part of studying should not be like reading, where our mind is merely following the page, but more like mining! since we are actively skimming and scanning through references for information, ideas, and even more, for schematic pictures – we should be constantly asking ourselves, “what’s this really about, what does it ‘look like’?”

2. **Starting at the end**: a computer is a good aid here, since reports are best written ‘backwards’: the Bibliography section at the end being written first (see pamphlet Referencing & Bibliographies, for the details of how to write reference list entries). And this is the time to begin, as soon as we look seriously at references. Thus we open the file which will be our assignment, and start listing the authors, dates and names of the books, articles and web-sites we are consulting. At the same time, we type in quotations, outline summaries and paraphrases from this reference material. We also start jotting our own ideas above the growing bibliography.
3. **Keeping focused on the assignment**: as we start informally writing our report, we must keep the assignment questions and issues in mind. *No matter what our own ‘take’ on the topic is, we must keep on topic, i.e., we must focus our responses on the set question/s.* At the same time, we find issues taking shapes we hadn’t anticipated, and quite often we will go back and revise our outline. When this research and note taking stage draws to a close, we’re ready to begin drafting.

**Drafting**

1. **Keeping focused on the assignment**: yes, this is worth repeating. As our research and note taking ends, and we have our final outline – or our first, since some of us prefer to outline the assignment at this point, rather than earlier – we begin to draft out parts of our plan. As we write, we must keep asking ourselves three questions:
   - Am I on topic?
   - What does this point I’m discussing really mean? and am I using the right language to describe it?
   - Am I connecting up? keeping one idea connected with the next, thereby keeping the reader in the picture too.

2. **Beginning at the end**: we have already written a reference list (bibliography), and we have our outline, and some quotations and summaries. If we have thought out points for our conclusion, it’s a good idea to write a rough version of this now, to get us started. If we do start at the end, we continue by looking at our outline, and writing the section we feel most confident about. Then we write other sections. Or after drafting the conclusion, we go to the top of our outline, and start writing the ‘body’ of our assignment first.

3. **Beginning at the beginning**: if we have already thought of a good beginning, with an engaging ‘hook’, it’s often a good idea to write the introduction first, which then allows us without much effort to continue into the body of our outline.

4. **Beginning with the body**: finally, we might write the body of our assignment first, under the subheadings suggested by our final outline; since in some cases the introduction and conclusion can be the most difficult parts to write.

5. **A draft is a draft**: As we draft, we shouldn’t try to get things neat or perfect. This is a first draft, and first drafts are always rough. Another thing here is that writing is also discovery, and our understanding of the topic, and thereby the shape of our paper, may change.

**Editing and proof reading**

1. **Re-drafting**: When we’ve written the main parts of our text, we re-read, editing and revising. (Some of us prefer to do this progressively, others when they’ve finished a first draft.) This stage is most important, since now we’re trying to be critical of our own work, trying to make sure of those three points above: checking if we’re on topic, if we’re saying what we mean to say, and if we’re connecting up our ideas, and giving the reader feedback about what we’re doing. We may get new ideas also, and write these in now; but even if we don’t, we will be re-writing.

2. **Proof reading**: when finished, we re-read again, correcting for grammar, sentence meaning, paragraph structure, and the overall style and flow of our text (speaking our text aloud, to activate other areas of brain processing!) And finally: we don’t forget to spell check!!