

Finding Your Focus

Each writing project presents its own organizational challenges. Sometimes a writer can go on and on for pages with examples that prove a point...only she hasn't quite figured out what that point is or noticed that all of her examples make the same basic illustration. Other times a writer has great ideas but can't quite figure out how to begin writing (ever try explaining a five-hundred-page novel AND its relation to jazz in just under 7 pages?). For such assignments, it's important to find your focus. Having a focus will help make the purpose of your writing clear and allow readers to follow your reasoning with ease.

Focus is the controlling idea, main point, or guiding principle of your writing. Strong writing has a very clear focus with secondary and related ideas positioned in order to supplement or support it. Focus is not something a writer necessarily has at the beginning of the writing process, but something she "finds" and refines through exploration, drafting, and revision. If you find yourself making broad generalizations, rather than specific claims, you should check on your focus.

There is no exact formula for finding focus within your writing, but a few questions might help you zero in on your topic:

- * What's most important? Do I need to explain the entire text to make my point, or can it be made by using a few sections? If I have two divergent ideas, which one do I find more compelling?
- * What does the assignment ask me to do? What will my readers be looking for? Are they more concerned with my textual arguments, my contextual arguments, my explanation or summary of the issue, or my own view? Will they be looking for breadth, depth, or something else? Should I focus on one aspect of a particular issue rather than taking on the entire problem?
- * What will my readers need to know more about? Have I provided complete and detailed explanations that will guide my readers forward and keep the argument on course?
- * Can I identify a logical progression of ideas within the essay? Might there be a better order for the content / argument?
- * Do I develop my points with minimal distraction? Or do I get muddled in tangential explanations and extraneous information?

See reverse for some techniques that might help you find your focus.

Some techniques to try:

- **Listing:** When you have several broad ideas to contend with, sometimes it's best to just get them onto the page and out of your system. Listing allows you to categorize your ideas before committing to one. Here's how it works:
 - Start with the overarching idea. It could be about the main character, an important theme, a major scene, a particular argument, etc.
 - Under that idea, begin listing whatever comes to mind in association with it. As you go, your list items may or may not become more specific.
 - If your items are becoming more and more specific, you might have the beginnings of an outline. Step back and see which items might make a more manageable topic.
 - If your items are *not* becoming more specific, try to circle and connect any related terms that you have listed. Do any patterns begin to emerge? If several words or concepts seem to be related, begin a new list with these as your starting point.

- **Outlining:** Outlining is great when your topic is fairly well developed, but you aren't quite sure how you want to tackle it. It allows you to roughly map the progress of your paper before committing to the actual writing. The trick, of course, is knowing when to follow it and when to modify it (know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em).
 - For a standard 5-7 page paper, your outline should not exceed one page. If you find that your subheadings are growing exponentially, it's a good bet that your main headings are too broad.

- **Draft Map:** Draft maps are great when you've already written a first draft and want to examine the larger structure of your paper. They allow you to see which paragraphs support your thesis and which paragraphs do not.
 - Identify your thesis statement or controlling ideas in the introduction. If you have more than one major claim, label each one (e.g. A, B, C or color code them).
 - Identify the topic sentence or main idea of each of your paragraphs.
 - Once you've identified the main idea of each paragraph, label them according to the main ideas outlined in your introduction. If a paragraph doesn't fit, give it another label (i.e. if your paragraph doesn't fit major claims A-C, give it the letter D).
 - Tally your results: Is there a vast difference between your introduction and the ideas in your paragraphs? Is one idea treated significantly more than another? If so, perhaps you should consider refocusing on this idea rather than attempting to tackle the others or consider devoting more time to the other ideas.