

- **What?** What happens? How is it similar to or different from other actions?
- **Who?** Who are the actors? Who are the participants, and who are the spectators? How do the actors affect the action, and how are they affected by it?
- **When?** When does the action take place? How often does it happen? What happens before, after, or at the same time? Would it be different at another time? Does the time have historical significance?
- **Where?** What is the setting? What is the situation, and what makes it significant?
- **How?** How does the action occur? What are the steps in the process? What techniques are required? What equipment is needed?
- **Why?** Why did this happen? What are the actors' motives? What end does the action serve?

Using Genre Features

Genres typically include particular kinds of information and organize it in particular ways. One way to generate ideas and text, then, is to identify the key features of the genre in which you're writing and use them to guide you as you write. Of course, you may alter the genre's features or combine two or more genres in order to achieve your purpose, but the overall shape and content of the genre can give you a way to develop and organize your ideas and research.

Outlining

You may create an *informal* outline by simply listing your ideas and numbering them in the order in which you want to write about them. You might prefer to make a *working* outline, to show the hierarchy of relationships among your ideas. While still informal, a working outline



distinguishes your main ideas and your support, often through simple indentation:

First main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

Second main idea

Supporting evidence or detail

Supporting evidence or detail

A formal outline shows the hierarchy of your ideas through a system of indenting, numbering, and lettering. Remember that when you divide a point into more specific subpoints, you should have at least two of them—you can't divide something into only one part. Also, try to keep items at each level parallel in structure. Formal outlines work this way:

Thesis statement

I. First reason

A. Supporting evidence

1. Detail of evidence

2. Detail of evidence

B. Supporting evidence

II. Another reason

Here is a formal outline of the first part of the research report by Dylan Borchers on pages 588–96, “Against the Odds: Harry S. Truman and the Election of 1948,” that shows how he organized it:

I. Introduction: Outcome of 1948 election

II. Bad predictions by pollsters

A. Pollsters stopped polling.

B. Dewey supporters became overconfident.

C. Truman supporters were either energized or stayed home.

III. Dewey's campaign overly cautious

A. He was overconfident.

B. His message was vague—he avoided taking stands.

IV. Dewey's public appearances poor

- A. He was seen as aloof, uncomfortable with crowds.
- B. He made blunders.
- C. His speeches were dull.

Writing out a formal outline can be helpful when you're dealing with a complex subject; as you revise your drafts, though, be flexible and ready to change your outline as your understanding of your topic develops.

Letter Writing

Sometimes the prospect of writing a report or essay can be intimidating. You may find that simply explaining your topic to someone will help you get started. In that case, write a letter or email to someone you know—your best friend, a parent or grandparent, a sibling—in which you discuss your subject. Explain it in terms that your reader can understand. Use the unsent letter to rehearse your topic; make it a kind of rough draft that you can then revise and develop to suit your actual audience.

Keeping a Journal

Some writers find that writing in a journal helps them generate ideas. Making note of your ideas, thoughts, feelings, or the events of your day can provide a wealth of topics, and a journal can also be a good place to explore what you think and why you think as you do.

Journals are private—you are the only audience—so you can feel free to write whatever comes to mind. And you can do more than write. If you choose a paper journal, doodle or draw in it, and keep clippings or scraps of paper between the pages; if you keep your journal on a computer, copy and paste interesting images or text you find online. Whatever form your journal takes, feel free to play with its contents, and don't worry about errors or grammar. The goal is to generate ideas; let yourself wan-