Making an Idea Map

By making an idea map, you can see how much you know about your topic, and also how your ideas and questions fit together.

Get a pad of sticky notes or a stack of index cards. Write down the central ideas and questions you have for your project, one per card. Then write down all that you know (and maybe what you want to know) about your topic, again using one card for each idea, fact, or question. If you already know of sources that you plan to use, make a card for each of these, too.

Arrange your cards on a large table or on the floor. Group together the cards that seem related. Don't stack them; you want to be able to see them all at once. Make a title card for each group ("Background of the problem," "Who this problem affects," "Possible solutions," etc.).

More ideas and questions will likely come to you as you complete this exercise. Make cards for them, too.

If one idea or question seems to fit in more than one group, make additional cards for the items and place them in each group where they seem to fit. If you have cards that don't seem to fit anywhere, set them off to the side, where you can still see them. You might find a place for them later.

When you've sorted all the cards, look over your idea map for patterns. What seem to be the guiding ideas? Which ideas are the most important, or come up most frequently? Perhaps there are two main groups of ideas that can be compared. Or there may be one set of ideas you would naturally need to discuss first, followed by others. Look for a sequence of ideas that makes sense to you.

Don't be afraid to regroup or re-sort your cards. Remember: this activity is not just organizational but also creative. By trying different organizational strategies, you might make connections you hadn't made before.

Based on your idea map, try writing two or three different topic sentences that could describe your project. As you begin outlining or drafting your paper, you can refer to the organization of your idea map. Each group of ideas might make up a separate paragraph, for example. Or, for a longer assignment, each card might be developed into a full paragraph, while a group of cards would become an entire section of the paper.

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