Cheat Sheet Module 6

Essential Concepts

Topic Selection

- **Assignment prompts contain critical information.** Read prompts carefully to identify the task, expectations, and constraints (topic, questions, audience, length, format, sources). Pay attention to verbs—they signal the kind of thinking and writing required. Make sure you understand what's being asked; use course readings and notes for context, and ask your instructor if anything is unclear.
- **Think rhetorically before writing.** Consider purpose, audience, and tone to guide your approach. Effective writing changes based on the situation—there's no one-size-fits-all formula. Understanding who will read your paper influences content choices, tone, and how much background information or explanation you'll need to include.
- **Know the role of sources.** Determine whether you're expected to use personal opinion, academic evidence, or both. Start brainstorming before researching to build a strong foundation for your topic. Scholarly sources can inspire ideas, highlight ongoing debates, and help you frame your topic as a meaningful contribution to a larger discussion.
- **Use the writing process flexibly.** The writing process (topic, prewrite, evidence, organize, draft, revise, proofread) is recursive—not linear. Expect to revisit earlier steps as you develop your ideas.
- **Approach matters as much as topic.** Open-ended assignments are an opportunity to explore ideas you're curious about. Connecting your topic to personal interests makes the writing process more meaningful and motivating. Even with a set topic, how you engage with it—your angle or perspective—can make your paper unique and relevant to your learning experience.
- **Use strategies to refine your topic.** Narrow broad subjects by focusing on a specific aspect, time period, geographic area, or event to create a manageable scope for your paper.

Prewriting

- **Prewriting is essential for generating and organizing ideas.** Activities like brainstorming, freewriting, journaling, mapping, and questioning help you explore your topic before drafting.
    - **Brainstorming generates ideas without judgment.** Write down everything that comes to mind to uncover interesting angles or connections. Group related ideas to discover patterns or potential directions.
    - **Ask guiding questions to deepen your focus.** Use prompts like “What do I care about?” or “What do I want to change?” to identify meaningful, manageable topics.
    - **Freewriting gets thoughts flowing without editing.** Timed, uninterrupted writing sessions can reveal recurring themes and help overcome writer’s block.
    - **Journaling explores personal responses and reflections.** It can generate writing topics by examining your reactions to experiences, events, or issues.
    - **Mapping organizes ideas visually.** Creating diagrams or mind maps shows relationships between concepts and helps identify central themes.
    - **Questioning helps narrow and structure a topic.** Use who, what, when, where, why, and how to develop direction and clarify your research focus.
    - **Sketching supports visual thinking.** Tools like Venn diagrams are useful for organizing comparisons or complex relationships between ideas.
- **Developing a strong thesis means clearly expressing your topic and angle, and placing it where it best serves your writing purpose**. A good thesis communicates both the subject and your perspective, and while it's often placed early in academic writing, it can also appear in the middle or end depending on your rhetorical strategy.
- **Start with a working thesis and refine it.** Begin with a working thesis that makes a specific, arguable claim—avoid statements that are too broad or too narrow—and be prepared to refine it as your ideas develop to ensure clarity, focus, and direction in your writing.

Finding Evidence

- **Support your thesis with specific, well-chosen evidence.** Whether you're writing a narrative or an academic essay, your claims should be developed with clear, concrete details—this may include facts, statistics, personal experiences, or examples, depending on the assignment’s purpose and genre.
- **Provide enough detail, but only what matters.** Strong writing balances sufficiency and relatedness: give enough information to develop your ideas fully, but make sure every detail clearly supports your topic and helps your audience understand your point.
- **Use your ideas to guide and shape your research.** Clarify your purpose and position before gathering sources so you can search with focus and find evidence that supports your thinking. Integrate that evidence thoughtfully using structure and analysis—tools like MEAL (Main idea, Evidence, Analysis, Lead out/Link) help connect it clearly to your thesis.

- **Know what types of sources are appropriate.** Some assignments require scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles; others may allow a broader range of evidence, such as credible websites or personal experiences. Always check the assignment guidelines or ask your instructor for clarification.
- **Evaluate the credibility of any source you use.** Consider the author's expertise, the publication's reliability, the use of citations, and the presence of bias. Tools like Google Scholar and library databases are useful for finding high-quality, trustworthy academic sources.
- **Use source material responsibly and cite it correctly.** Quote, paraphrase, and summarize as needed, but always indicate where ideas come from and explain how each source supports your point. Citing accurately helps avoid plagiarism and makes your writing clearer and more persuasive.

Organizing Essays

- **Structure your essay around a thesis and clear sections.** Start with an engaging introduction that presents your central claim, then use body paragraphs to develop distinct supporting points with evidence and explanation, and end with a conclusion that reinforces your thesis without adding new information.
- **Follow paragraph structure to build strong body sections.** Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence, include relevant evidence (correctly cited), provide analysis or commentary, and end with a transition that connects to the next idea—this helps maintain flow and coherence.
- **Use essay structures that fit your assignment type.** Argumentative, comparative, and cause-and-effect essays each have typical formats, such as block or point-by-point organization. Understanding these patterns helps you present your ideas logically and effectively for different purposes.

Drafting

- **Start drafting by expanding your outline into full paragraphs.** Use your prewriting and outline to build a rough draft, focusing on getting your ideas down without worrying about perfection—this version is meant to be revised.
- **Experiment with different drafting approaches.** Fast drafting gets ideas out quickly with placeholders for missing content, while slow drafting emphasizes structure and detail from the start. Choose the method that helps you keep moving forward.
- **Expect to write multiple drafts.** Strong papers typically go through several drafts—each draft gives you a chance to rethink and refine your ideas—use early drafts to develop content and structure, and later drafts to improve clarity, coherence, and tone.
- **Revision means re-seeing your work—not just fixing grammar.** Go beyond surface edits by assessing whether your argument is well-supported, your ideas are organized logically, and your introduction and conclusion effectively frame the essay.

- **Overcome writer's block by writing through it.** If you're stuck, try writing down your questions, brainstorming responses, talking with others, or revisiting what you've written—momentum often comes once you start typing.

Glossary

brainstorming

a prewriting strategy used to quickly generate a wide range of ideas about a topic without judgment or filtering, often to spark creativity and explore possible directions for writing

drafting

the stage of the writing process where you begin turning your ideas into sentences and paragraphs, focusing on getting your thoughts down on paper without worrying about perfection, so you have a base to revise and improve

evidence

the facts, examples, data, or explanations used to support key sentences within a paragraph and help prove the overall claim or thesis of an essay, much like exhibits in a trial that convince the jury of an argument's validity

freewriting

a prewriting strategy where you write continuously for a set period of time without worrying about grammar, spelling, or staying on topic, in order to unlock ideas, explore your thoughts, and overcome writer's block

journaling

a prewriting strategy used to freely record thoughts, questions, and reflections, helping writers explore their thinking, make connections, and discover ideas they can develop in future assignments

mapping

a prewriting strategy for generating and organizing ideas by placing a main topic in the center of a page and surrounding it with related ideas, using lines or arrows to show connections and relationships

MEAL paragraphs

a structured format for academic body paragraphs that includes a Main Idea (the topic sentence), Evidence (support from sources), Analysis (the writer's explanation or interpretation of the evidence), and a Lead out or Link (a closing sentence that ties the paragraph back to the thesis or transitions to the next point)

paraphrasing

restating a specific part of a source in your own words and sentence structure while keeping the original meaning, and still giving credit to the source with a citation

popular source

a source written for a general audience, such as news articles, blogs, or magazines, which may be informative but often lacks detailed analysis or peer review

primary source

an original, firsthand account or direct evidence of an event, idea, or research, such as letters, interviews, historical documents, or scientific study results

questioning

a prewriting strategy used for exploring and developing a topic by asking and answering key questions—such as who, what, when, where, why, and how—to help organize thoughts, identify important details, and narrow the focus for writing

quoting

using the exact words from a source in your writing, placed inside quotation marks, and followed by a citation to credit the original author

relatedness

the quality of how well the details and information in a piece of writing connect to and support the main topic or purpose—excluding anything that is off-topic or unnecessary

scholarly source

a source written by experts for academic or professional audiences, often peer-reviewed and published in academic journals, containing in-depth research and references

secondary source

a secondhand account that analyzes, interprets, or comments on a primary source—such as biographies, reviews, or scholarly articles that evaluate research or events

sketching

a visual prewriting technique that uses drawings, diagrams, or other visuals to explore and organize ideas, helping you see relationships, clarify complex concepts, and plan your writing—such as using a Venn diagram to compare and contrast ideas

summarizing

condensing the main ideas of a source into a brief overview in your own words, highlighting only the most important points, and including a citation to credit the original author

sufficiency

the quality of having enough clear, relevant, and accurate detail to fully support a topic

thesis angle

the specific claim, perspective, or argument you make about your topic in a thesis statement, which helps focus your writing and shows readers what to expect from your essay

working thesis

a preliminary version of your thesis statement that expresses your main idea early in the writing process, helping to guide your research and organization while remaining flexible enough to change as your thinking develops