

This presentation was prepared by the...

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# Beating Writer's Block

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EXPLORING IDEAS FOR  
GETTING STARTED ON A PAPER



Let's say you've got a paper  
due next Wednesday....

Your professor probably assigned a general topic, but it's your job to narrow that topic down.

How do you get started?  
Do you wait for inspiration?  
What if you don't feel  
inspired before Wednesday?

People who write for a living  
know that they can't wait for  
the Muse to come along and  
give them a hand...

...but professional writers  
also know some tricks to get  
their mental gears turning.

In this workshop, we'll review techniques that student writers often find helpful when they are tackling a writing assignment.



Some of these are even fun!

The purpose of all of these invention techniques is to explore ideas, to find out what you—the writer—know and don't know about the topic, and what parts of the topic interest you.

What you'll put on paper is not a draft of the actual essay. It's an *exploration*. No one has to see it but you—so be sloppy if you want!

# Getting started:

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When you're thinking through ideas for writing, jot them down on paper. This helps you:

- remember details.
- keep several ideas in mind at the same time.
- analyze parts of an idea.
- see connections between ideas.
- sort through ideas, discarding some and focusing on others.

# We'll explore several options:

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- Brainstorming
- Mapping
- Outlining
- Freewriting

# Brainstorming:

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- Write down your main topic/idea.
- Make a list of everything you can think of about your topic. Don't try to put it in order at this point—just do some “free association.”
- Finally, go back and look at what you've written. Circle the parts that interest you.
- Do more brainstorming about the circled parts, or use another invention technique.

# Other names for brainstorming:

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- Listing
- Free association

# Mapping:

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When you have a general topic, you can get a better overview by creating an idea map. This not only gets your ideas down on paper, but also gives you a sense of “hierarchy” —helps you decide which are major and which are minor ideas. Finally, it shows connections between ideas.



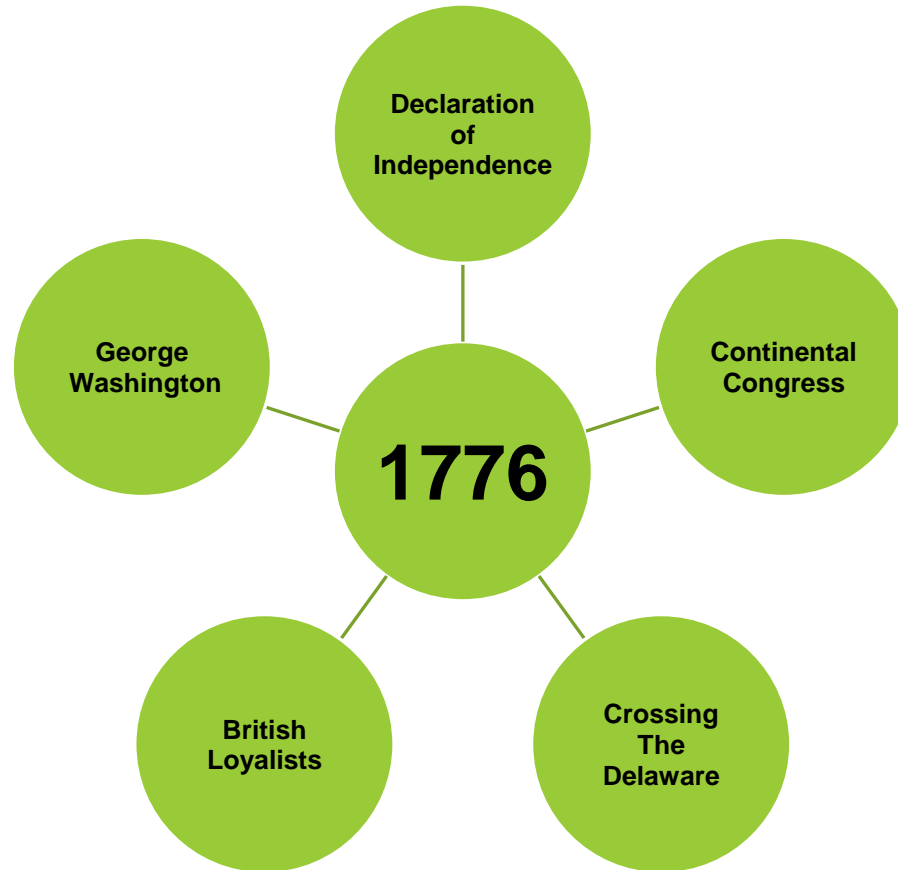
# Mapping Continued:

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- Draw a circle in the middle of your paper.
- Write your main topic/idea in that circle.
- Around the circle, write ideas that come to mind ABOUT your main idea. Circle each one, and draw a line connecting it to the middle circle.
- Start branching out, clustering specifics and details around each circle and connecting them to the relevant circle.

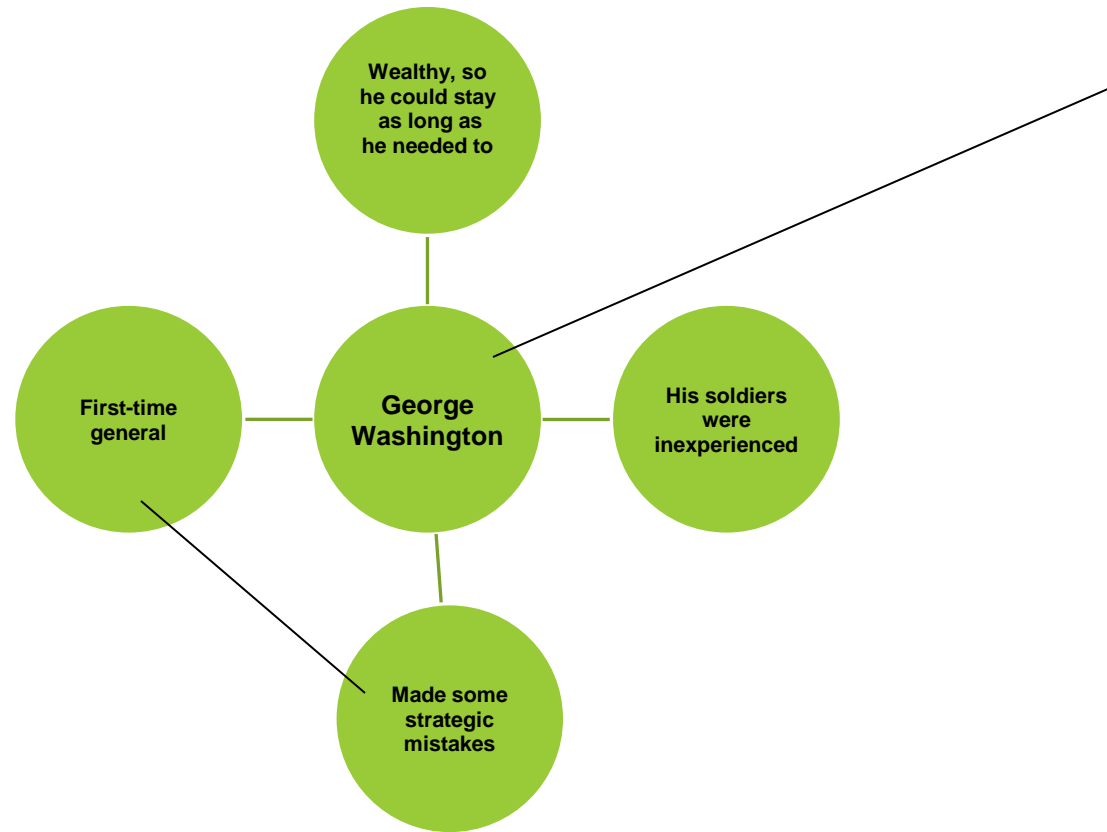
# Example of mapping for a history research paper on 1776:

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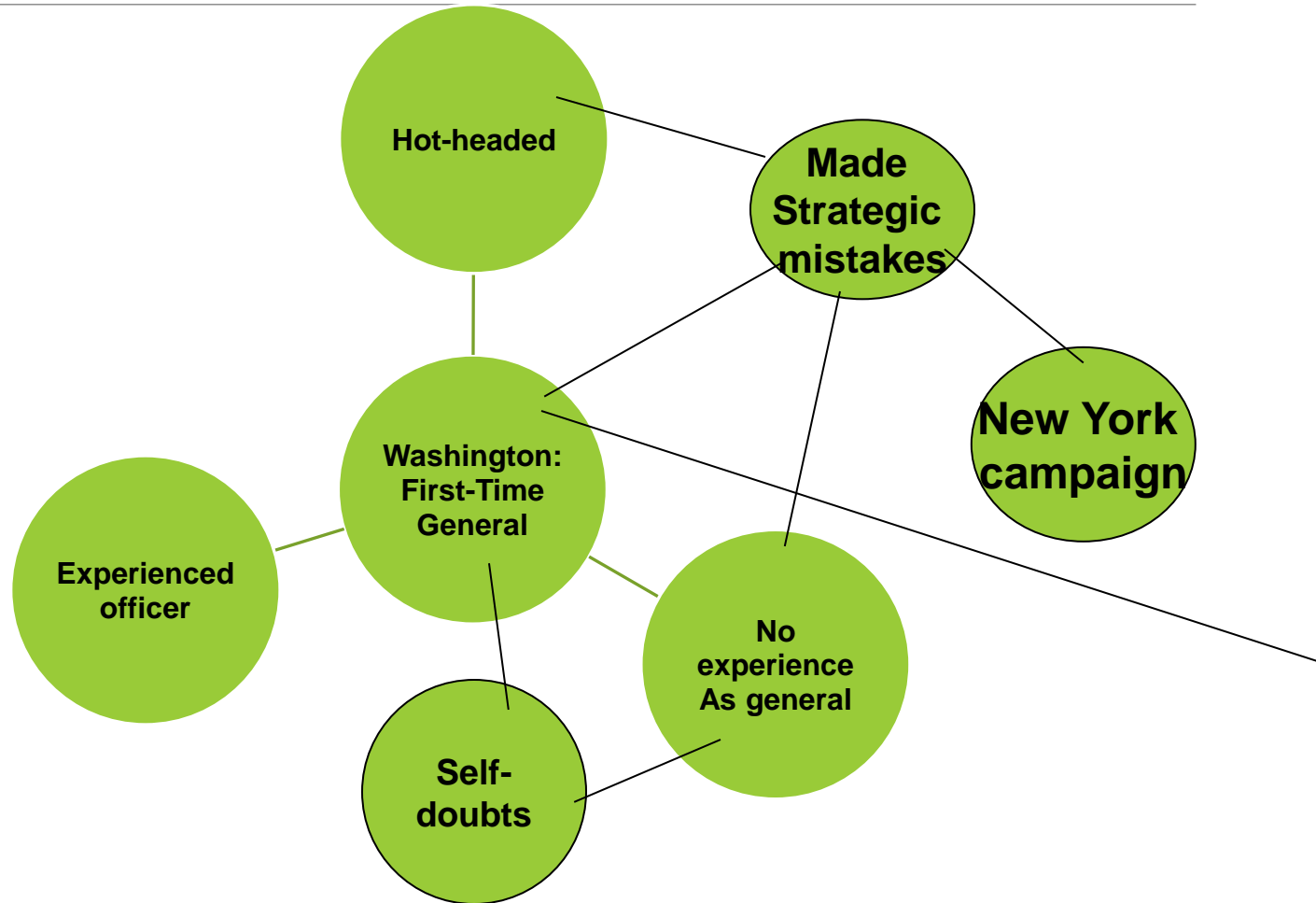
# Next: branch out some more...

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# ...and more!

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By now you've narrowed the topic down enough so it's specific and manageable.

# Other names for mapping:

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- Clustering
- Bubble diagram
- Webbing
- Cognitive map

# Outlining:

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- Write down your main topic.
- Divide it into large categories, writing these flush with the left margin of your paper.
- Under each category, list subcategories. Indent to write them under the large categories.

# Example of outlining:

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## Sibling squabbles

- My brother
  - I was older, so I was better at teasing.
- My sister
  - Clarinet practice.
  - The diary incident.



Like mapping, outlining gives you a sense of “hierarchy” — it distinguishes between the major ideas and the minor ones.

# Freewriting:

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Simply writing—in sentences or phrases—your random thoughts about a topic. When you “freewrite,” your purpose is to simply capture ideas—not to write a finished draft. Freewriting is not an assignment to be graded; it’s just something to get you thinking at length about your topic.

# Freewriting Continued:

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- Think of a topic before you begin.
- Decide on a specific amount of time for writing—5 or 10 minutes.
- Time yourself.
- Don't stop writing during this time. If necessary, write "I don't know what to write next."
- Look back over what you've written; circle stuff you want to use in a draft.
- If you don't have enough ideas, focus on the circled parts and do more free writing.

# It's okay if what you write ...

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- Isn't organized
- Is kind of sloppy
- Strays from the topic
- Has spelling, punctuation, or grammar errors.

Don't forget: Writing Center tutors can help you with all of these "getting-started" techniques.