Windtunneling takes a collaborative approach to the thesis-building process without risking collusion. It allows someone else to track and judge your ideas very early on, when you are best positioned to invent and shape a paper that truly reflects the argument you want to make. Furthermore, it forces you to sit down and work, as an effective partner will prompt and guide your continuous expression of ideas. To start windtunneling, simply turn the page...
First, find a partner willing to give about 20 minutes of his or her time to help you. You are going to be giving this person word vomit for a while, so make sure you find someone you trust to stay engaged. Sit them down with a paper and pen, or their laptop or tablet, and give them instructions to record anything striking, unique, or potentially supportive of an argument from what you are about to say.

Second, brief your partner on the assignment prompt and material you’re working with. Knowing something about your writing situation will help your collaborator know what to look for and how to prompt you as you talk.

Third, simply begin talking about your paper, brainstorming aloud, continuously for a set time (usually 10-15 minutes). Set a timer: you’re not allowed to stop talking until time is up. This moderate length of time will allow you to begin by rehearsing ideas and support you already have but then, as you run out of initial ideas, force you to think of additional claims and connections. Your partner will write down what you say, and he or she can also stimulate your thinking by asking pertinent questions as you talk. (Note: your partner shouldn’t worry about trying to get down everything you say; the point is to capture interesting claims, potential questions or concerns, specific pieces of evidence, and so forth—diverse building blocks for a larger argument.)

Fourth, once you reach the time limit, give your partner some time to finish writing. You can talk faster than your partner can write, so it is important to give him or her a couple of extra minutes to complete the record of your speech and elaborate on any abbreviations. You’ll then look over the results with your partner; carefully reflect on the material and exchange opinions about anything that seems particularly promising. Pay attention, because here is where you’ll find the core of your thesis and support.

Finally, start drafting—you should have some good ideas to guide your work! Write out a provisional thesis from your results by crossing out anything that’s irrelevant and articulating the connections between your most compelling thoughts: how do they go together? what impact do they make?

Don’t hesitate to windtunnel again if you get stuck!

Windtunneling is a metaphor for a specific form of collaboration that can occur between two people. The first, the speaker, acts as the wind, spewing as much as he or she can at the other partner. The other partner acts as the recipient of the wind, seemingly getting crushed like the person shown above. His or her job is to withstand the onslaught of words in an attempt to gauge meaning and direction for the speaker.

This writing guide was authored by CDT William Grodesky (’16) in the context of academic coursework for the Writing Fellows Program at the United States Military Academy. It includes images drawn from the public domain. It has been edited and produced by Dr. Jason Hoppe, Director of the Writing Fellows Program. 2016.