Drafting as a "Writing to Learn" Process

Once you have questions -- then what? Questions are great places to begin, but they are just the beginning. How would you begin answering them? How do you start getting ideas down on paper?

This is when writer's block strikes. People have different techniques for generating content: scribbling on napkins, writing in journals, talking into a voice recorder. I would recommend starting with something academics call "freewriting." In other words, as Anne Lamott so crisply puts it, let yourself write a "shitty first draft." This is where you let go of your inner critic. Don't worry if what you're typing sounds rudimentary or silly. Just sit there and write for 10 or 15 minutes. Everything that comes to mind. Your ideas will trigger other ideas -- and perhaps more reading and questioning of your texts. You might even start sketching outlines of your paper.

This is a tried-and-true technique. All of a sudden you have a few pages and you are feeling better about yourself. Maybe you did have something to say.

But you should be aware of a crucial danger to freewriting. It only works if you are willing to go back to your material, find the few key ideas and insights that your freewriting produced, AND DELETE THE REST. (Cutting most of it and placing it at the end of your document is a less painful option.) This is the trick: Freewrite but don't get attached to what you've written. As one professor once said: "The quality of a paper can be measured by how much has gone in the trash." Cutting is especially hard to do when you've come up with a particularly nice sentence or phrase, one that you really like. The problem is that this sentence or phrase can be off-topic. It's best to cut it and start again. Gertrude Stein tells writers that they have to be willing to murder these "little darlings," and I've found her advice to be right.¹

¹ For more details about the process of "freewriting," see Nothing Begins with N: Toward a Phenomenology of Freewriting. Ed. Pat Belanoff, Peter Elbow, and Sheryl I. Fontaine.