

## The Writing Center @ KUMC

Dykes Library G011 • [www.kumc.edu/writing](http://www.kumc.edu/writing) • [writing@kumc.edu](mailto:writing@kumc.edu) • 913-945-8477

# Before You Start That Paper:

## Some Prewriting Tips

*Prewriting* is a general term for a range of activities that help you get started writing. It is a strategy to develop ideas, to explore and organize your thoughts prior to drafting. It also helps you to determine purpose and audience. Prewriting works with prompts and specific directions from your professors; it also works when you're starting an article for publication from scratch. With prewriting, you never have to face a blank page or screen. Here are some activities to try:

### Freewriting

This is freedom at its best in writing. Sometimes called "brain dumping," free writing requires nothing but a timer and something to write with. The writer simply puts down whatever is in their head. It's supposed to be a mess. You don't want the inner editor/critic interfering with this process. Many writers start with a prompt to generate ideas, memories, impressions, guesses, and so on. A typical freewrite is 10 minutes in which you create a flow and go with it, not stopping to think/search for words or "meaning." You forget spelling grammar punctuation. Think of it as "stream of consciousness." When you've written for 10 minutes or more, you stop and look back at your freewrite, underlining or circling or highlighting the most interesting elements. Freewriting lets you see and examine what you already know about a subject, including your biases and prejudices. If you want a prompt, here are some to try:

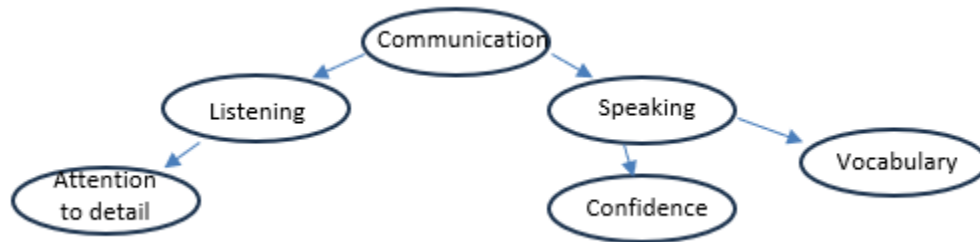
- Right now, I am most curious about...
- I most hope to write...
- I am most excited about...
- Describe your project to a fifth grader.
- If your data could talk, what are the questions you would ask it?

### Looping

With looping, you do a freewrite; then, after you've looked back over what you've written, you pick an idea (it can be anything) and begin freewriting on that idea. After a second freewrite, repeat the process until you have three or four "loops." Looping clarifies thought in a sustained way, even if you end up (as often happens) throwing out more than you keep. This is a good thing—leaving only the best ideas behind.

## Clustering

This activity also goes by different names: mind mapping, idea mapping, tree mapping, and so forth. You start with a circle that contains a main idea. Next, you draw lines to other circles containing sub-ideas or issues relating to the main idea. As you work off the core, you try to group ideas or cluster them so that an organization begins to emerge. Here's an example:



## Listing

We make lists every day—grocery lists, to-do lists, and so on. So why not generate ideas for a paper by making a list? Like freewriting or clustering, listing helps you create/see ideas and details. You don't worry about organization; you just jot down what comes to mind about a subject until you run out of ideas. The easiest way to list is to make columns or separate words (thoughts) with bullets or dashes. Numbering works too.

## The 5 Ws

Who? What? Where? When? Why? And sometimes How? These are the journalist's questions you can use to explore a topic. They are flexible since a "who" question may be obvious or not so obvious. In any case, the 5Ws can generate a lot of useful info quickly. Devising your own questions can force you to think about your work in a new way, as if you were an interviewer or audience member. Then, those question you come up with, in turn, can serve as freewriting prompts.

## Outlining

Everybody knows what an outline is and does. It is a plan that organizes your ideas. Outlines work best *after* you've done freewriting, looping, clustering, or listing. They can be formal or informal. They are usually *hierarchical*, i.e., beginning with a major idea or point and proceeding to supporting points to explain a topic or phenomenon. Outlines have numbered and lettered headings and subheadings, such as the five-level outline (I. A. 1. a. i.). They show relationships between ideas and facts. The problem with outlines is that you occasionally limit your thinking. Use outlines when you feel stuck getting started but stay flexible. The greatest benefit is that they can save time by creating a system you can adjust. Here's a short list of some types:

- Topic outline (most common)
- Sentence outline (complete sentences create the framework)
- Reverse outline (created after writing a first draft)
- Decimal outline (1.0, 1.1, 1.2, 1.2.1, etc.)
- Rough outline (bullets or numbers)

## Use Your Imagination

There are always other possibilities, including talking with classmates, friends, and professors. Brainstorming out loud, to yourself or to another, helps you think about ways to start your paper. And of course the Writing Center at KUMC is a great resource (though we are biased). The writing specialist welcomes students and residents who come without a draft in hand. Asking questions is a big part of his work to help you discover yours!

Finally, compare these prewriting techniques to the strategies you've used up to now. If you can incorporate any or all of them, you'll be using proven techniques that make your writing stronger. And keep your prewriting efforts until the assignment is finished. You never know when you'll need to go back to an early idea or fact. The writing process is evolutionary but not linear, and it will teach you many things along the way if you are alert and engaged.