

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 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. Below is a list of some activities.

Freewriting

This is freedom at its best in writing. For ten minutes or so, you write down anything and everything that pops into your head, without attention to grammar, spelling, or correctness of any kind. You write fast and fill up a page or two. If nothing comes to mind, you write, "Nothing comes to mind." Something always comes to mind. If one thing after another appears, you write it down and go with the flow.

You can start with or without a definite topic. (With a topic, you have a guide. Without a topic, you're fishing, waiting for a nibble, a bite, a big one.) 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.

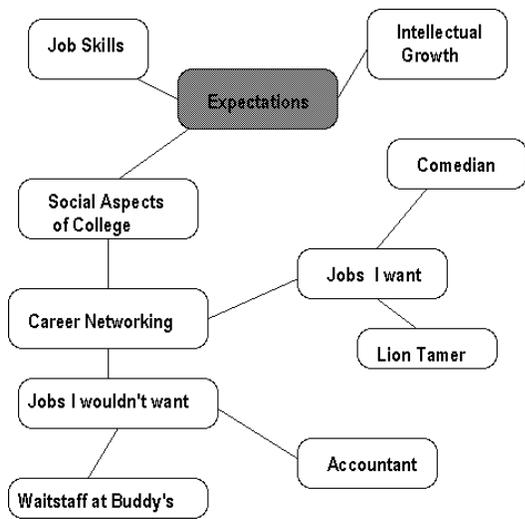
Some writers call this activity "dumping." Others call it "morning pages." Whatever the designation, it allows you to make a mess and then it clears the ground of the junk so that you can see where you have to go. And practiced regularly, freewriting becomes a very effective tool.

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 retain. This is a good thing. When you draft, even when you revise, without having first done any freewriting or brainstorming, you often do not throw out as much as you should!

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 from Lisa Kirby's website:



Source: http://faculty.ncwc.edu/lakirby/english%20090/prewriting_strategies.htm

Listing

Ideas for a paper can be generated by making a list. It is way to create and sort out ideas on paper. Like freewriting or clustering, listing helps you see and explore the possibilities of ideas and details. The benefit is that you don't have to worry about organization; you just jot down what comes to mind about a subject until you run out of things to write. The easiest way to list is to make columns or separate words (thoughts) with slashes or dashes. Numbering works too.

Outlining

Everybody knows what an outline is and does. It is a plan that organizes your ideas. Outlines work best *after* you've done some brainstorming, e.g., freewriting, looping, clustering, or listing. However, they can be used to brainstorm. Outlines 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 often can't actually write from them. As Peter Elbow says, "Sometimes the words of the outline and the words of the writing are in different universes." They don't fit together. Use outlines when you feel there is a real correspondence between idea and language. 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)

Tagmemics

This is a system that lets you look at (and arrange) a subject from multiple perspectives. In essence, you look at a thing three ways: 1) as a thing itself, 2) as a thing that changes over time, and 3) as part of a greater context.

Here’s another way of describing tagmemics: any idea, topic, object, or experience can be viewed in three ways. First, you think of it as a particle (static unit), next as a wave (dynamic unit), and finally as a field (unit within larger network of relationships). Here’s a graphic to illustrate the trio. The topic (not the graphic) comes from Lisa Kirby’s website:

Particle	Wave	Field
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the term <i>nuclear family</i> mean? • Who formulated it? • What are its features? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long has the nuclear family characterized family structure in the United States? • When did it begin to change? • What factors caused it to change? • How might these factors affect the nuclear family in the future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are changes in the structure of the American family related to other changes such as employment, religion, education, and marriage? • What are the consequences of changes in the nuclear family for American life in general? • What are the consequences for politics, education, social services?

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 resources (even though we say so ourselves). 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.