

Prewriting

What is Prewriting?

“Prewriting” is a blanket term for a wide range of techniques to start thinking about your paper before you begin the formal process of writing a draft. Your prewriting process begins, in effect, the moment you read a writing assignment.

Why Prewrite?

Prewriting can help you with your writing process by starting you off on the right foot both intellectually and psychologically. Prewriting strategies help writers generate ideas and figure out a paper’s provisional structure; doing both of these things *before* you start writing a draft can help save you significant time and energy. Additionally, prewriting is an excellent way to avoid and overcome writer’s block and reduce the stress of getting started with a new writing project.

It’s easy to get overwhelmed by the number of stylistic, mechanical, and organizational concerns that go into drafting a paper. These aspects of the writing process are particularly difficult if you haven’t initially given yourself a chance to play around with your ideas and think about what you ultimately want to communicate to your reader.

Getting Personal and Flexible

Your Writing Personality

We don’t all approach paper planning in the same way because we don’t all approach writing in the same way. Take a quick [writing personality test](#) to get a sense of how who you are in everyday life translates into who you are when you sit down to write. For example, extroverts are less likely to find outlines helpful, but benefit tremendously by talking through their ideas with others; introverts, on the other hand, like to write in seclusion and often find more traditional paper-planning activities helpful.

Why Variety and Flexibility Matter

Personality determinants aside, experienced writers have any number of possible tools at their disposal at every stage of the writing process. Even if you have a particular technique you’ve used to get going on a paper in the past, consider trying out some new ones when working on future assignments. Your writing process will never be an exact science. Mapping may work brilliantly for one paper and prove much less productive for another project. Find out what works best for you and for the paper at hand, and don’t be afraid to try something new.

How to Prewrite

Brainstorming

According to the [Kansas University Prewriting Guide](#),

“Brainstorming, also called listing, is a process of generating a lot of information within a short time by building on the association of previous terms you have mentioned.

- Jot down all the possible terms that emerge from the general topic you are thinking about. This procedure works especially well if you work in a team. All team members can generate ideas, with one member acting as scribe. Don't worry about editing or throwing out what might not be a good idea. Simply write down a lot of possibilities.
- Group the items that you have listed according to arrangements that make sense to you.
- Give each group a label. Now you have a topic with possible points of development.
- Write a sentence or two about the label you have given the group of ideas. Now you have a topic sentence or possibly a *thesis statement*.”

Brainstorming doesn't have to be done in isolation or on paper. In fact, many writers find that it's easier to first “get the ideas out” orally. Ask a friend to take some notes as you talk about your paper. Your friend doesn't necessarily need to write down every word that comes out of your mouth; in fact, if she focuses on jotting down key words or phrases that come up more than once, her notes may help you identify some of your own most important points. Encourage your friend to ask you questions if you hit a lull. Don't worry about how much she knows about the course, the field, the subject matter or your particular topic; her lack of familiarity will force you to define your terms well, make sure the basic ideas are crystal clear in your own mind, and communicate why your idea is important.

Draw Your Paper

Sometimes the best way to get a clear idea of where you're going with a paper is to represent it visually. There are any number of strategies for turning your paper into a picture—see [Gallaudet University's mapping website](#) for some suggestions, ranging from palm trees to flow charts—but the main idea is simply to let your ideas literally take shape in a way that makes the most sense to you. Visual representations of papers most often take the form of “maps” or “clusters,” in which you group your ideas, key terms, or major pieces of evidence together according to how they fit together conceptually, and then draw lines between them to show connections. One advantage of mapping is that it allows you to see “the big picture” without immediately committing to the more rigid organizational structure of an outline.

Set up a white board or a large piece of blank paper on a wall near your writing space and let yourself experiment with mapping techniques. If possible, save different “versions” of your doodles as you would different drafts of your paper; remember, the goal in prewriting is to get everything out on paper in some form or other without a lot of self-editing. Keep your doodle-space accessible throughout the writing process, in order to both keep in mind your original thoughts and to encourage you to rethink organization and connections as you develop your draft.

Freewriting

Having a hard time actually transforming your thoughts into printed words? A freewriting exercise can be a great way to overcome the intimidation of putting pen to paper for the first time in a writing project. Give yourself a time limit—say, ten or fifteen minutes—and stick to it, if possible, with a stopwatch. Come up with a question or topic to discuss. For example, if you are working on a paper on the relationship between religious traditions and American medicine, and you know you want to discuss Hinduism among other religious traditions somewhere in this paper, your freewrite topic might be “Hinduism.”

Write the topic or question at the top of your page before you begin. Start writing (or typing), and don’t let yourself stop until time is up. *Do* put down on paper everything that comes to mind; *do* let your thoughts take you where they will. *Do not* worry about sounding good, using correct grammar, connecting points logically, or only recording “relevant” information. This exercise is a chance for you to learn more about what might be relevant for your paper.

Above all, *do not stop writing*. If you are at a loss for words, rewrite the last sentence or phrase you wrote down until you come up with a new thought. Don’t let your pen leave the paper or your fingers leave the keyboard. When time is up, look over what you’ve written. Underline, highlight or circle words, phrases or sentences that seem like they might be useful. What in your freewrite would you want to say more about in your paper? Take a particularly evocative phrase, word or sentence and turn it into the topic/title for another freewrite, and repeat the same steps over again. Your goal in freewriting is not to produce pages of polished prose but to warm yourself up for the drafting process and generate some key ideas and phrases to incorporate into a draft.

When Am I Ready to Stop Prewriting?

Prewriting can be as stressful and unproductive as premature drafting if you aren’t careful to limit how much time you spend on it before moving on to the next stages of planning and writing your paper. Depending on time constraints and your personal preferences, set some sort of time limit on prewriting to make sure you allow yourself enough time for drafting and revising. Writing a paper does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory. You don’t have to know exactly where you’re going before you begin, and you can revert to prewriting at any point during the process to rethink your claims, structure, use of evidence, and mode of argumentation. Stop prewriting when the ideas are bubbling and you feel energized. Come back to these same techniques if and when you get stuck later on in the drafting process.