

Swarthmore College Writing Center

Prewriting

Prewriting is a strategy to help you generate and organize ideas before you develop a thesis and start writing your first draft. It helps you get many ideas out onto paper at once, giving you more options to choose from when writing your draft.

Here are some useful prewriting strategies:

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is useful at the earliest stages of your thinking process. Exploring your ideas without placing any restrictions on your thoughts can help you come up with a topic.

- Answer your prompt with the first words and phrases that come into your mind. Don't stop to analyze or censor what you've jotted down.
- Review the list you've made. Are there any interesting ideas that pop out at you? Are there any connections between ideas that could be explored further? If nothing strikes you, try another prewriting technique.

Freewriting

Freewriting helps you generate a large amount of written material that you can work from to create a draft. It allows you to temporarily ignore the restrictions writers feel in formal writing, but it also provides more structure and depth than brainstorming.

- Start writing about your topic. Don't censor your ideas, just try to get all of them down on paper as soon as they come into your head. There are absolutely no restrictions on freewriting, so don't worry about the quality of your writing. It's okay to have grammatical or spelling errors and to jump from idea to idea with no warning. Just don't stop writing! To limit your freewrite, give yourself a time limit.
- Read what you have written. Pick out the main thoughts and interesting points that you wrote about. Look for questions you raise, assessments of ideas that are worth continuing, and novel approaches to thinking about issues.

Clustering

Making a visual representation of ideas helps free some writers from the usual linear approach to writing. The main purpose of clustering is to generate ideas and then connect them visually.

- First, think of a key word or phrase that sums up your intended topic. Write this down in the center of a piece of blank paper. Circle it.
- Then write down other important ideas related to this central topic. Represent the connections between the different items with arrows. Be willing to erase and rework your cluster so that it makes sense to you.
- Continue to work outward, allowing your ideas to take you off in any direction.
- After you've finished, consider the relations between your ideas, and decide what ideas are most important. You might have to rewrite your cluster once you eliminate outlying ideas and reorder the ones you'd like to pursue in your paper.

Talking to Someone

One of the best prewriting strategies is to talk to someone else about your assignment. Your professor, a WA working at the Writing Center, or even a friend who may have some interest in or experience with your topic can help you refine your ideas. Don't be afraid to approach your professor and ask questions – chances are that she'll be happy you're showing an interest in her assignment.