

The Writing Process: Prewriting Strategies for Invention and Discovery



Once you have chosen a topic or received an assigned topic, the first step is to begin prewriting. At this stage, you not only write down any ideas that you find interesting or worth more exploration, but also ideas you may find troubling. The following strategies outline further questions or techniques you can use to help generate ideas or that will promote the prewriting process.

Asking Questions

To help you get started, consider the following questions when examining a piece of artwork or a selection of text:

1. Who or what is involved?
2. What happened?
3. What is my first response to the work?
4. What caused your response?
5. What knowledge do you already have that will help you to understand the work?
6. What questions would you like to have answered about the works?
7. What is the title? The subject matter?
8. When, where, and why was the work made?
9. Who would have originally seen the work?
10. Who or what is my central focus?
11. Are my reasons ample and documented?
12. How well does my strategy work?

Be sure to seek answers to your questions and consider the approaches of the authors of the interpretations and criticisms that you read. Return to the work to consider it in the light of your reflection and research.

Keeping a Journal

Keep a journal to capture and record ideas and events that are on your mind. Journals follow a particular sequence and allow you to compare ideas to both later and earlier ones, providing an ongoing record of your constancy, change, or growth. Since your journal is private, you can write whatever you want and in any style that is comfortable to you. Be sure to focus your time and attention on the ideas you want to develop without worrying about grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

Brainstorming/Making Lists

Begin by asking yourself a question and then listing as many answers as you can think of. Don't try to evaluate the ideas; the point is to get as many down on paper as you can. Try thinking of listing as making a grocery list—write down everything known about a topic in short phrases. Don't even bother with complete sentences. If you're a visual learner, you might even try making your list in the form of a cluster diagram.

Free-Writing

Free-writing is nothing more than writing down anything and everything possible. It doesn't consider context, meaning, spelling, punctuation, or even sentence structure. With free-writing, one word triggers another idea and allows for thoughts to flow freely without concern for format or correctness, ultimately removing the barriers placed on us to produce good writing. Since no one will read our free-writes but ourselves, there's no need to impress anyone. Your goal is to get the ideas down on paper so you don't forget them. To begin the free-writing process, start with following steps:

1. Write as fast as you can for a fixed amount of time—about 5-10 minutes.
2. Don't let your pen stop moving until the time is up.
3. Try not to worry about organization, spelling, grammar, or sentence structure.
4. Go back and read through what you've written to see if it sparks any new ideas or to discover the direction you want to take.

Looping

Looping is a form of sequenced free-writes—each free-write focuses on an idea from the previous free-write and expands it. To begin looping, use the following steps:

1. Free-write for 10 minutes on a topic you're working on or to help you to discover a topic you'd like to write about.
2. Review the free-write and select one sentence closest to what you want to continue developing. Copy this sentence and take off from it, free-writing for another 10 minutes.
3. Repeat step 2 for each successive free-write to keep inventing and discovering.

Outlining

An outline is simply an organized list and is the most well known form of prewriting. In fact, most professors require a formal outline for submission as part of a course requirement. Furthermore, outlines are most useful if you modify them as you write in accordance with new thoughts or information. With a formal outline, there are a few rules to remember:

1. Topics cannot be divided into only one subtopic—for every A there must be a B, and so forth.
2. Subheadings must be logical.
3. Headings must be parallel in structure.

Clustering

Clustering is a method of organizing ideas visually to reveal their relationships. Also known as mapping, clustering involves drawing a map of connecting circles and is helpful for both inventing and discovering a topic and for exploring a topic once you have done all your preliminary research. To begin clustering, follow these steps:

1. Write down a word or phrase reflecting the focus of what you want to write about.
2. Write ideas related to your focus in a circle around the central phrase and connect them to the focus phrase. If one of those ideas suggests others related to it, write those in a circle around it.
3. If one idea begins to accumulate related ideas, start a second cluster with the new term in the center of your paper.

Talking it Out

Simply begin by sitting across from one another and start talking about topics you'd like to explore, ways of exploring or examining those topics, and any sources that might be helpful. Don't worry about who begins or who does the majority of the talking. The most important thing to remember is that conveying our ideas orally helps us to generate more ideas and also helps us to utilize our critical thinking skills. Be sure to write down any ideas, whether in sentences, lists, etc., so that you have a record of your conversation to consult when you begin the research process.

Sources

Barnet, Sylvan. *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, 8th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.

Fulwiler, Toby, and Alan R. Hayakawa. *The Blair Handbook*, 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007.

Hacker, Diane. *A Writer's Reference*, 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003.

Reid, Donna K. *Thinking and Writing about Art History*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004.