

## Prewriting: Getting Started

Have you ever felt anxious about starting a new paper, especially if it's on a topic you don't know much about or aren't particularly interested in? If your answer is "yes," rest assured that you're not alone. Many writers, students and professionals alike, struggle to find their bearings when they first sit down to write, as Anne Lammott, author of *Bird by Bird*, explains in her chapter "Shitty First Drafts": "Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow" (22). Getting started can be one of the most difficult parts of the writing process, especially if you're unsure how to begin or feeling pressured to write the "perfect" paper from scratch. Fortunately, there are techniques you can use to overcome writer's block and generate material for later drafting. While not all techniques will work equally well for all types of writing tasks, you will find that at least one or two techniques from the list below will help you develop and organize ideas for your first draft. I personally have used each of these techniques at least once, and I use at least two of them—reading and annotating and focused freewriting—every time I write a paper.

### Reading and Annotating

Writing before reading about your topic is like taking a long drive before putting gas in your car. Reading fuels the writing process. Our ideas are partially derived from reading or listening to what others have said and determining how their views shape, support, or conflict with our own. Until we've read what others have written about Topic X, we cannot know whether our views on Topic X are new or old, conventional or radical, substantiated or unfounded. Therefore, before you do any substantial drafting or even pre-drafting, I strongly urge you to do some preliminary research on your topic. Find several reliable sources, read them, summarize what their authors say about your topic, then compare and contrast the authors' views with your own. Not only will you familiarize yourself with key terms, authors, and sources you might later reference in your actual draft, you will also be more prepared to enter into scholarly and/or professional conversations about your topic.



### Focused Freewriting

You may be already familiar with freewriting, for which the writer writes down anything that comes to mind for a designated period of time (usually five to fifteen minutes) without stopping or worrying about grammar. Freewriting is a useful strategy for overcoming writer's block, as writers often find that by turning off their inner critics and putting pen to paper they come up with some startling ideas or even a passage or two that can be used in an early draft. Focused freewriting is similar to freewriting in that it, too, involves writing without stopping or correcting errors. With focused freewriting, however, the writer isn't writing down whatever comes to mind: rather, the writer's efforts are focused on a specific prompt or question. Sometimes the prompt or question can be quite simple, like "Okay, what do I already know about my topic?" I often freewrite on this prompt when I start a new project; I then usually follow it up with a freewriting response to "Now, what else *should* I know about my topic?"

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Try writing on one of the prompts (listed below) for ten minutes and see what you come up with. Remember, don't stop to correct misspellings or reword awkward sentences; just write. When your ten minutes are up, read what you've written and underline any ideas that you'd like to develop further. Then write for another ten minutes on any of your underlined ideas; when you're finished, underline new ideas that you'd like to elaborate on. Chances are good that during this process you'll have generated some material you can use in your first draft. If, however, you don't have much success with one prompt, try a different one.

- *If I could say anything about this topic in my paper, it would be \_\_\_\_\_*
- *How might someone else in my life (say, a parent, sibling, or friend) look at my topic? What would this person say about my topic?*
- *What have I seen, heard, or experienced that's shaped my attitudes about this topic?*
- *One common belief or view about my topic is \_\_\_\_\_, but I believe that \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_*
- *My readers will be interested in learning about my view on this topic because \_\_\_\_\_.*
- *What I especially want my audience to think about after reading my paper is \_\_\_\_\_.*

### Talking with Others

A friendly conversation with another person about your topic can go a long way towards helping you understand and appreciate others' views on your topic as well as articulate your own views. In fact, such conversations don't necessarily have to be with experts or professionals, although you should certainly seek out such persons if you plan on conducting formal interviews as part of your research. Talk with your classmates, co-workers or family members and friends about your topic, especially if they're familiar with or have a vested interest in your topic. Even if they don't know very much about your topic, you can still share your views about it with them and see how they respond. And, of course, you are always welcome to come to the Writing Center to talk with one of our tutors; we'd be happy to act as a sounding board to your ideas.

Keep the following questions in mind when you're talking with others about your topic. After engaging in conversations with others, jot down your responses to these questions. Later on, as you prepare to draft your paper, review these notes and underline any key points you might explore in your paper.

- What is this person's view on my topic? Why?
- How does this person's view compare with my view? With others' views?
- How did this person respond to my view when I shared it?
- Does this person have a stake in my topic, and if so, what is it?

Note: Keep in mind that a casual conversation with a friend or co-worker is not equal to a formal interview and should not be treated as such. Whereas information gathered from formal interviews can be used as source material, information from chats with friends or co-workers cannot.

### Other Techniques – Listing (or Brainstorming), Informal Outlining, and Clustering (or Webbing)

**A. Listing (or Brainstorming):** Listing is one of the simplest and quickest forms of pre-writing. To start, jot down as many terms, names, concepts, or ideas related to your topic that you can think of. Next, read over your list and underline items that seem related to one another and to your overall view on your topic. Then, under each of the items you underline, list additional terms, names, concepts, or ideas

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related to that particular item. Listing is a fast, focused form of brainstorming. By using this technique, you will not only generate ideas for your paper but also begin the process of sifting through ideas and determining which ones to include in your paper.

**B. Clustering (or Webbing):** Clustering is quite similar to listing except that instead of merely jotting down ideas you are establishing relationships among them. To begin a cluster, write your overall topic in the center of a page and draw a circle around it. Next, write three or four subtopic ideas around your circled topic; then draw lines extending from the topic circle to each of these subtopic ideas and circle each subtopic idea. Around each subtopic circle, write down three or four related ideas, then draw lines extending from the subtopic circle to each of these ideas, and draw a circle around each idea. By creating an intricate web or cluster of ideas, the writer can visualize how various ideas relate to one another and how they might be arranged in the writer's paper.

**C. Informal Outlining:** Informal outlining is a more focused form of pre-drafting and should usually be done after sufficient ideas have been generated through listing, clustering, and/or freewriting. To begin an informal outline, write down the major sections or main ideas in the order that they will appear in your paper, leaving sufficient space between each section. Underneath each section, write down several subsections or supporting ideas. Informal outlining enables the writer to create a basic plan or map of the paper's overall structure and see how well the various parts of that map might work together. Informal outlining should not be confused with formal outlining, which features full sentences and adheres to the Roman numeral system. Informal outlines more closely resemble flowcharts or lists and can be easily changed. If you see sections, subsections, or ideas that are out of place, move them around or replace them with other ideas.

#### Works Consulted

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst. *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009. Print.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. Print.

Ryan, Leigh and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. Print.