***6 Types of Prewriting Practices***

*Prewriting* refers to the range of activities in which the writer engages before setting fingers on the keyboard (or pen to paper). Prewriting is the process of generating and recording ideas. The main distinction between this stage and *planning* is that it is the creative phase rather than the more critical phase of planning. In planning, the writer considers and rejects ideas. Prewriting activity is less critical, given to coming up with as much material as possible, some to be incorporated, some to be rejected.

Doing prewriting takes five to ten minutes per topic and can save you both a lot of time and headache down the road to achieving an “A” paper.

**Types of prewriting include: drawing, freewriting, brainstorming/listing, clustering/mapping, Asking Questions, Outlining**

*Portfolio of Journal Activity: Write the essay you have begun by storyboarding. Add an analysis of whether and how storyboarding aided your writing process.*

*Envisioning a Webpage* is another way to think visually about writing. Students who are ready to begin writing about their topic may find it useful to envision it as a Webpage, with short bits of text, graphics, and links. If your class has access to a computer lab where students can create Webpages, you will certainly want to assign them. You will probably find that they enjoy creating Webpages and take pride in their work. We have found that students routinely invest more time and care in writing a Webpage than in writing an essay or report. The visual dimension of the Web document gives students a new route into composing an overall sense of their text, and that overview can help them compose a more conventional print text as well. Even when you don't teach in a computer lab, students can gain from designing a text as a Webpage by sketching it on paper. Like the storyboard approach, this method of envisioning a text begins to move students along the road to planning activities.

*Activity: Imagine yourself assigned to write a five- to ten-page paper on teaching as a career. Then envision a Webpage that would represent your thinking about your topic, sketching it on paper.*

**1)Freewriting**  
  
Freewriting helps you identify subjects in which you are interested. It assumes that you know your interests subconsciously but may not be able to identify them consciously, and it assumes that you can bring your interests into consciousness by writing about them (as writing equals thinking). Freewriting is like stream-of-consciousness writing in which you write down whatever happens to be in your thoughts at the moment. After you do a number of freewritings, you may find that you have come back to certain subjects again and again. Repeated subjects are good for further development through writing, as they obviously are important in your thoughts.   
  
To freewrite, use your computer or get paper and pencil, whatever is more comfortable for you. Get a kitchen timer. Set the timer for five minutes. Write down whatever comes into your head during the five minutes without concerning yourself with complete thoughts, whole sentences, or correct spelling or punctuation. Don't even be concerned about making sense in the writing. Just concentrate on recording your thoughts and filling as much space as possible before the five minutes elapse. If you can't think of anything to write, just write "don't know don't know" until you have other thoughts. If you think that this exercise is stupid, then write "this is stupid this is stupid" until you have other thoughts. Remember, the purpose of freewriting is to fill as much space with as many words as possible in the five minutes of writing time. After the first five minutes, rest a minute and read over what you have written, then follow the procedure at least two more times. Stop at this point and do something else. Do another series of five-minute freewritings later in the day. You may be able to discern common threads (repeated ideas) after you do a number of freewritings. The ideas you repeat are good ones for [essays](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/b92d6149cc49534e852569c30069f8b2?OpenDocument) as they obviously are ideas that interest you. Try to create a "storm" of ideas, not passing judgment on any of them or censoring any idea that comes to mind, no matter how apparently absurd it is. This is not the time to think about whether or not this idea will actually fit into a paper, and anything goes--main ideas, details, feelings, curse words, forgotten chores, whatever comes to mind: ***just keep writing!***

***Activity:*** *Pause in your reading for a few minutes and try some brainstorming now. Imagine you have been assigned the task of writing a personal essay on, say, your favorite holiday or the last book you read or movie you saw. With pen and paper or sitting at the computer, list as many ideas related to this topic as you can think of in a few minutes.*

Sample of Freewriting

*freewriting. don't know. don't know. this is harder than I thought it would be. worried. what if I don't have any ideas to bring out. the writer's perpetual concern--lack of ideas. Cliches. wonder how they got started? had meaning at one time. say "every dog has his day" now and people will jump at you for using sexist language. don't know. don't know. don't know. don't know. hear the timer ticking. time. so much to do and so little time to do it in. what is time? arbitrary or not? different for different people. so many people pressed for time now. wonder if time went more slowly in grandparents' day, if they needed 24 hrs. to do what we now do in 12. they had to use washboards, coal heat. greenhouse effect. are we greenhousing? greenhouse should have a nice, flowering plant connotation, not self-destruction. destruction by plants. Little Shop of Horrors. plants going crazy. at least the weeds in the garden do. do not like bugs in summer. flies and mosquitoes the worst. Read somewhere that June is "kill the filthy fly" month. I agree. hate those large flies that buzz you, usually when you're trying to eat lunch. read about cluster flies recently. they seem to cluster around your coffee when you go out of the room. then the big question, did they dip into it or not? mosquitoes as bad at night. like divebombers in your ears. don't know. don't know. don't know. there are other annoyances, part of everyday life. call waiting, caller id, especially when you're on the calling end. telephone solicitors. door-to-door salespeople. rude people in general. the person in the express line at the supermarket with 20 items in the cart. could go on about this one.*

*Freewriting* is a famous prewriting technique proposed by Peter Elbow. It is similar to brainstorming but requires more sustained writing. A writer practices freewriting by writing everything that comes to mind during a preset time period, say five or ten minutes. The requirement is that he not stop writing at all during that period. If he can't think of anything to say, he may write, "I can't think of anything to say," or if he finds the exercise boring, he may write something like, "This is boring. Why are we doing this anyway?" Most students practicing freewriting will not get stuck in this kind of response and will go on to produce often surprising amounts of text.

***Activity:*** *Take five to ten minutes to try some freewriting. Using pen and paper or sitting at the computer, simply write everything that comes to mind. The important thing is to keep writing. If you can't think of anything to write, write, "I can't think of anything to write. I can't think of anything to write," until your active brain pushes you away from such boring repetition into saying something new. If you can set a timer or ask someone else to time you, you won't pay attention to the time and will be able to focus more on your writing.*

**2)Brainstorming**  
  
Brainstorming, like [freewriting](http://www.esc.edu/ESConline/Across_ESC/WritersComplex.nsf/3CC42A422514347A8525671D0049F395/CE2B510E7D9975AE852569C3006ACCCC?OpenDocument#freewriting), is a [prewriting](http://www.esc.edu/ESConline/Across_ESC/WritersComplex.nsf/3CC42A422514347A8525671D0049F395/CE2B510E7D9975AE852569C3006ACCCC?OpenDocument#ideas) technique designed to bring subconscious ideas into consciousness. It's a good technique to use when you know a general subject you're interested in writing about but don't exactly know what aspect of the subject you want to pursue. Brainstorming is like a stream-of-consciousness technique in which you rapidly record all ideas related to a general subject. All ideas are equally acceptable; the purpose of brainstorming is to identify as many ideas related to the subject as possible.   
Most likely you have either experienced brainstorming in a business setting or have seen it portrayed on television or film: the ad exec holds up a product and says to the advertising team, "All right, people, let's pitch ideas to sell this soap!," and a person standing by a flip chart jots down ideas frantically as employees shout them out.  
  
Brainstorming also involves a second step. Once you've exhausted your ideas about the subject, you need to go back to those ideas and review them, crossing some off, linking others that are related, and marking some that seem more important than others. You can group and re-group ideas that you've generated, and perhaps decide to pursue some ideas further through more brainstorming or other types of [prewriting.](http://www.esc.edu/ESConline/Across_ESC/WritersComplex.nsf/3CC42A422514347A8525671D0049F395/CE2B510E7D9975AE852569C3006ACCCC?OpenDocument#ideas)   
  
 Sample of Brainstorming

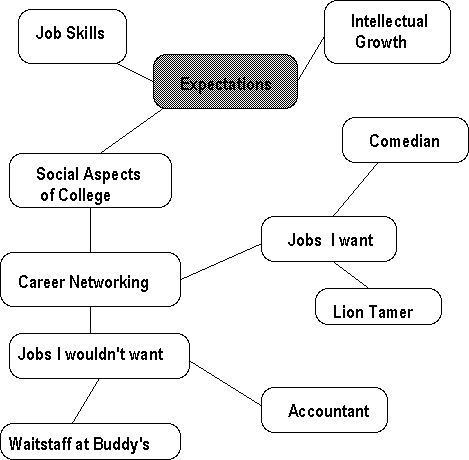
|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| subject: | **Soup** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | chicken |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | medicinal properties |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | soup recipes |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | dinner |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | water quality and its effect on flavor of soup |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | web site for soup |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | cultures |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | mMediterranean soup with lamb intestines |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | vegetable soups |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | soup spots on clothing |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | certain cities o.k. for men eating soup to sling necktie over shoulder |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | soup etiquette |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | side or point of spoon in mouth |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | stone soup children's story |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | new diet craze |

**3)Clustering/Mapping**  
  
Clustering or mapping can help you become aware of different ways to think about a subject. To do a cluster or "mind map," write your general subject down in the middle of a piece of paper. Then, using the whole sheet of paper, rapidly jot down ideas related to that subject. If an idea spawns other ideas, link them together using lines and circles to form a cluster of ideas. The whole purpose here is to use lines and circles to show visually how your ideas relate to one another and to the main subject.

With this technique, you start with a circle in the middle that contains your main idea and then you draw lines to other, smaller circles that contain sub-ideas or issues related to the main idea. Try to group like ideas together so as to organize yourself.

**Example: About the value of a college education**



It also allows you to see, at a glance, the aspects of the subject about which you have the most to say, so it can help you choose how to focus a broad subject for writing.

**4)Asking Questions about a Subject**  
  
*Asking questions* is a good way to go about starting a story, an expository essay, or a research paper. The journalist's five Ws (*Who? What? Where? When? Why?*) have often been successfully used as a prewriting prompt for writers at many levels. But the writer may generate a more specific, topic-related set of questions, depending on the requirements of the assignment and his preliminary knowledge of the topic.

{Purdue’s OWL handout on Thought Starters lists 20 questions with the note “Adapted from Jacqueline Berke's Twenty Questions for the Writer”}

**Ask Questions to Develop a Perspective on a Subject** Ask the journalist's "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," and "how" in order to get a sense of the subject's scope and of the way in which you may want to approach the subject--the angle that makes sense for you to take when thinking about the subject.   
  
**Ask Questions to Narrow a Subject** Ask questions about your subject and use the answer to activate another question until you come to a question that is a good stopping place (a focused question that you know you can research, or a focused question that you can answer on your own with examples and details). For example:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Subject: | Education | http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | Education in what country? | the U.S. |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | What level of U.S. education? | education for children |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | What level of childhood education? | Head Start |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | What do I want to know about it? | special programs |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | Any particular programs? | reading readiness |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | How effective are Head Start reading readiness programs? | http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif |

**or**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Subject: | Education | http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | Education for whom? | college students |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | What type of college student? | adult, returning student |
| http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif | What problems do adult, returning students face? | http://www.esc.edu/icons/ecblank.gif |

As you develop a "chain" using each answer to generate another question, your subject both narrows in scope and becomes more complex--more appropriate for a college-level [essay](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/ddbc866bc537f67e85256a460066ab2d?OpenDocument#essay) which requires some depth of thought.   
  
**Ask Questions to Determine a Subject's Feasibility** Once you have a few subjects that you think might be appropriate for further development into [essays](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/ddbc866bc537f67e85256a460066ab2d?OpenDocument#essay) or [research papers](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/3cc42a422514347a8525671d0049f395/ddbc866bc537f67e85256a460066ab2d?OpenDocument#research), ask questions to determine each subject's feasibility:

* What exactly do I know about the subject?
* Where did I get my knowledge (first-hand experience, books, television, newspapers, discussions with others, etc.)?
* Will my knowledge yield sufficient examples and details for me to write in some depth about this subject, or will I have to do some additional research? That is, if I want to write about this subject, what else do I need to know?
* Where can I find additional information if I need more? books? magazines? journals? interviews with co-workers? family members? personal observations?
* Are these information sources readily available to me?

**5)Making a List**  
  
Making a list means just what it says, recording ideas that relate directly to a certain subject. Listing is more directed than [brainstorming](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/0/ce2b510e7d9975ae852569c3006acccc?OpenDocument#brainstorming) or [freewriting](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/0/ce2b510e7d9975ae852569c3006acccc?OpenDocument#freewriting); if you decide to make a list as a form of [prewriting](http://www.esc.edu/esconline/across_esc/writerscomplex.nsf/0/ce2b510e7d9975ae852569c3006acccc?OpenDocument#ideas), then you already have a sense of both your particular focus on the subject and the various aspects related to that focus. You may end up expanding or deleting from your list as you work with it, and that's to be expected. A list is a means of capturing all aspects that you can think of that relate to your focus on the subject. For example:   
Focused Subject: ways in which communication can flow in an organization

1. traditional top-down, with managers providing information and issuing orders to subordinates
2. bottom-up, which is rarer, in which management has an open-door policy for receiving information and suggestions from employees
3. cross-departments, in which people on the same level in the organization share information
4. working teams, which may include members from various levels of the organization brought together by a special project
5. grapevine, which cuts through all levels and is the most difficult to control

**6)Drawing**

*Drawing* may be a useful prewriting tool for visually oriented students. In *ARTiculating: Teaching Writing in a Visual World*, Eric H. Hobson suggests storyboarding as a prewriting activity: quickly, roughly sketch six pictures of a narrative. The prewriting activity helps visual thinkers compose an overview of the topic they will then translate into words.

*Activity: Imagine you have been assigned to write an essay about your adjustment to college life. Make several simple sketches of the scenes that you recall from your early days in college.*

Some information provided by Alice L. Trupe