4.2: What is Prewriting?

Prewriting describes all of the thinking and planning that precedes the actual writing of a paper.

Much careful thought needs to be given to the assignment in general at the beginning of prewriting before focusing on your topic.

Thinking

- First, understand the writing assignment and its limits. Consider the assignment’s length. Always know the expected length of a writing assignment. A two-page paper has a much narrower topic than a ten-page paper would have. If there is no page limit, consider the nature of the assignment to suggest its length. A summary of a chapter will be much shorter than the original chapter. An analysis of a poem may likely be longer than the poem itself.
- Second, establish the assignment’s purpose. It is important to know the reasons you are writing or the purposes you are trying to accomplish with the writing.
  1. **Expressive writing** conveys personal feelings or impressions to the audience.
  2. **Informative writing** enlightens the audience about something.
  3. **Persuasive writing** attempts to convince the audience to think or act in a certain way.

Other more specific purposes can include entertaining, analyzing, hypothesizing, assessing, summarizing, questioning, reporting, recommending, suggesting, evaluating, describing, recounting, requesting, and instructing.

- Next, determine the assignment’s audience. You must determine to whom you are writing. An audience can be an individual or a group. An audience can be general or specialized. Once you define your audience, you must determine how much the audience already knows about the subject to know how much or little background information should be included. You should also determine how best to approach your audience in terms of language, rhetorical strategies, purposes for reading, and background knowledge.
Then devise the assignment’s occasion. The occasion for which you are writing will determine the formality and scope of a writing project. An in-class writing assignment will differ from an out-of-class formal assignment. A memo for fellow office workers will differ from a report written for the company’s president. A letter to an aunt will differ from a letter written to a bank to request a personal loan.

Finally, assess your own previous knowledge of the subject. Before writing, you need to determine what you already know about a subject, what you need to find out about the subject, and what you think about the subject. Personal essays draw upon your own experiences and observations; research essays require you to gain new knowledge through research.

**Topic Choice**

The next step in prewriting, and often the hardest, is choosing a topic for an essay if one has not been assigned. Choosing a viable general topic for an assignment is an essential step. Sometimes your instructor will give you an idea to begin an assignment, and other times your instructor will ask you to come up with a topic on your own. A captivating topic covers what an assignment will be about and fits the assignment’s purpose and its audience. There are various methods you may use to discover an appropriate topic for your writing.

**Using Experience and Observations**

When selecting a topic, you may also want to consider something that interests you or something based on your own life and personal experiences. Even everyday observations can lead to interesting topics. After writers think about their experiences and observations, they often take notes on paper to better develop their thoughts. These notes help writers discover what they have to say about their topic.

**Tip**

Issues and Controversies is a first-rate source.

**Reading**

Reading plays a vital role in all the stages of the writing process, but it first figures in the development of ideas and topics. Different kinds of documents can help you choose a topic and develop that topic. For example, a magazine advertising the latest research on the threat of global warming may catch your eye in the supermarket. This cover may interest you, and you may consider global warming as a topic, or maybe a novel’s courtroom drama sparks your curiosity of a particular lawsuit or legal controversy. After you choose a topic, critical reading is essential to the development of a topic. While reading almost any document, you evaluate the author’s point of view by thinking about his main idea and his support. When you judge the author’s argument, you discover more about the author’s opinion as well as your own. If these steps already seem daunting, remember that even the best writers need to use prewriting strategies to generate ideas.

**Tip**

The steps in the writing process may seem time consuming at first, but following these steps will save you time in the
future. The more you plan in the beginning by reading and using prewriting strategies, the less time you may spend writing and editing later because your ideas will develop more swiftly. Prewriting strategies depend on your critical reading skills. Reading prewriting exercises (and outlines and drafts later in the writing process) will further develop your topic and ideas. As you continue to follow the writing process, you will see how to use critical reading skills to assess your own prewriting exercises.

Freewriting

Freewriting (also called brainstorming) is an exercise in which you write freely (jot, list, write paragraphs, dialog, take off on tangents: whatever “free” means to you) about a topic for a set amount of time (usually three to five minutes or until you run out of ideas or energy). Jot down any thoughts that come to your mind. Try not to worry about what you are saying, how it sounds, whether it is good or true, grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Instead, write as quickly as you can without stopping. If you are stuck, just copy the same word or phrase repeatedly until you come up with a new thought or write about why you cannot continue. Just keep writing; that is the power of this technique!

Writing often comes easier when you have a personal connection with the topic. Remember, to generate ideas in your freewriting, think about readings that you have enjoyed or that have challenged your thinking. Then write about it. Doing this may lead your thoughts in interesting directions. Quickly recording your thoughts on paper will help you discover what you have to say about a topic. When writing quickly, try not to doubt or question your ideas, but if you do, write those, too. Allow yourself to write freely and unselfconsciously. Once you start writing with few limitations, you may find you have more to say than you first realized. Your flow of thoughts can lead you to discover more ideas about the topic as well as different perspectives on it. Freewriting may even lead you to discover another topic that excites you even more than your original idea. Freewriting can also be used to narrow a topic and/or to develop supporting ideas once a broad topic has been chosen.

Journaling is another useful strategy for generating topic and content ideas. Journaling can be useful in exploring different topic ideas and serve as possible topic ideas for future papers.

Tip

Some prewriting strategies can be used together. For example, you could use experience and observations to come up with a topic related to your course studies. Then you could use freewriting to describe your topic in more detail and figure out what you have to say about it.

Focusing Topic

Once a general topic has been assigned to or chosen by you, then you must decide on the scope of the topic. Broad topics always need to be narrowed down to topics that are more specific. Then you need to determine what you are going to say about a subject. Two ways to help narrow a general subject down to a narrower topic are probing and focused freewriting.

- **Probing** is asking a series of questions about the topic. **Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?** As you choose your topic, answering these questions can help you revisit the ideas you already have and generate new ways to think about your topic. You may also discover aspects of the topic that are unfamiliar to you and that you would like...
to learn more about. All these idea-gathering techniques will help you plan for future work on your assignment.

For example, if you were writing about tattoos, then you might ask yourself the following questions: **Who** do you know that has tattoos or who are some celebrities with memorable tattoos? **What** kinds of tattoos do people usually get—what symbols and what words? **Where** do people place tattoos on their bodies or where do people go to get tattoos—tattoo parlors? **When** do people get tattoos—is it after some memorable event or life stage? **Why** do people get tattoos? Finally, **how** do people get tattoos—what is the actual process?

- **Focused Freewriting** is freewriting again and again with each freewriting cycle becoming more focused (also called **looping**), and it can yield a great deal of useful material. Try this by taking the most compelling idea from one freewriting and starting the next with it.

### Developing a Topic

The following checklist can help you decide if your narrowed topic is a possible topic for your assignment:

- Why am I interested in this topic?
- Would my audience be interested and why?
- Do I have prior knowledge or experience with this topic? If so, would I be comfortable exploring this topic and sharing my experiences?
- Why do I want to learn more about this topic?
- Is this topic specific? What specifics or details about this topic stand out to me?
- Does it fit the purpose of the assignment, and will it meet the required length of the assignment?