



Prewriting Strategies

Pre-writing strategies use writing to generate and clarify ideas. While many writers have traditionally created outlines before beginning writing, there are other possible prewriting activities. Five useful strategies are brainstorming, clustering, free writing, looping, and asking the six journalists' questions.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming, also called listing, is a process of generating a lot of information within a short time by building on the association of previous terms you have mentioned.

- Jot down all the possible terms that emerge from the general topic you are thinking about. This procedure works especially well if you work in a team. All team members can generate ideas, with one member acting as scribe. Don't worry about editing or throwing out what might not be a good idea. Simply write down a lot of possibilities.
- Group the items that you have listed according to arrangements that make sense to you.
- Give each group a label. Now you have a topic with possible points of development.
- Write a sentence about the label you have given the group of ideas. Now you have a topic sentence or possibly a thesis statement.

Clustering

Clustering is also called mind mapping or idea mapping. It is a strategy that allows you to explore the relationships between ideas.

- Put the subject in the center of a page. Circle or underline it.
- As you think of other ideas, link the new ideas to the central circle with lines.
- As you think of ideas that relate to the new ideas, add to those in the same way.

The result will look like a web on your page. Locate clusters of interest to you, and use the terms you attached to the key ideas as departure points for your paper.

Clustering is especially useful in determining the relationship between ideas. You will be able to distinguish how the ideas fit together, especially where there is an abundance of ideas. Clustering your ideas lets you see them visually in a different way, so that you can more readily understand possible directions your paper may take.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a process of generating a lot of information by writing non-stop. It allows you to focus on a specific topic, but forces you to write so quickly that you are unable to edit any of your ideas.

- Freewrite on the assignment or general topic for several 5-10 minutes non-stop. Force yourself to continue writing even if nothing specific comes to mind. This freewriting will include many ideas; at this point, generating ideas is what is important, not the grammar or the spelling.
- After you've finished freewriting, look back over what you have written and highlight the most prominent and interesting ideas; then you can begin all over again, with a tighter focus. You will narrow your topic and, in the process, you will generate several relevant points about the topic.



Looping

Looping is a freewriting technique that allows you to increasingly focus your ideas in trying to discover a writing topic. You loop one 5-10 minute freewriting after another, so you have a sequence of freewritings, each more specific than the other. The same rules that apply to freewriting apply to looping: write quickly, do not edit, and do not stop.

Freewrite on an assignment for 5-10 minutes. Then, read through your freewriting, looking for interesting topics, ideas, phrases, or sentences. Circle those you find interesting. A variation on looping is to have a classmate circle ideas in *your* freewriting that interests him or her.

Then freewrite again for 5-10 minutes on one of the circled topics. You should end up with a more specific freewriting about a particular topic.

Loop your freewriting again, circling another interesting topic, idea, phrase, or sentence.

When you have finished four or five rounds of looping, you will begin to have specific information that indicates what you are thinking about a particular topic. You may even have the basis for a tentative thesis or an improved idea for an approach to your assignment when you have finished.

The Journalists' Questions

Journalists traditionally ask six questions when they are writing assignments, 5 W's and 1 H: *Who?*, *What?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *Why?*, *How?* You can use these questions to explore the topic you are writing about for an assignment. A key to using the journalists' questions is to make them flexible enough to account for the specific details of your topic. For instance, if your topic is the rise and fall of the Puget Sound tides and its effect on salmon spawning, you may have very little to say about *Who?* if your focus doesn't account for human involvement. On the other hand, some topics may be heavy on the *Who?*, especially if human involvement is a crucial part of the topic.

Possible generic questions you can ask using the six journalists' questions follow:

- **Who?:** Who are the participants? Who is affected? Who are the primary actors? Who are the secondary actors?
- **What?:** What is the topic? What is the significance of the topic? What is the basic problem? What are the issues?
- **Where?:** Where does the activity take place? Where does the problem or issue have its source? At what place is the cause or effect of the problem most visible?
- **When?:** When is the issue most apparent? (past? present? future?) When did the issue or problem develop? What historical forces helped shape the problem or issue and at what point in time will the problem or issue culminate in a crisis? When is action needed to address the issue or problem?
- **Why?:** Why did the issue or problem arise? Why is it (your topic) an issue or problem at all? Why did the issue or problem develop in the way that it did?
- **How?:** How is the issue or problem significant? How can it be addressed? How does it affect the participants? How can the issue or problem be resolved?

The journalists' questions are a powerful way to develop a great deal of information about a topic very quickly. Learning to ask the appropriate questions about a topic takes practice, however. At times during writing an assignment, you may wish to go back and ask the journalists' questions again to clarify important points that may be getting lost in your planning and drafting.