

Quick Guide

PURPOSE: The main purpose of prewriting is to select and develop specific subjects for writing. It deals with all of the brainstorming, talking, collecting, and planning you do before you write.

★ You may also do some prewriting activities later in the writing process. For example, once you review your first draft, you may decide to gather some additional information about your subject. (Writing is a recursive process, meaning that a writer may repeat or revisit steps during the writing process.)

STARTING POINT: During prewriting, you do the following:

- select a specific subject,
- collect information about it,
- focus on a specific part of the subject for writing, and
- plan how to use the supporting information.

Remember: Always select a subject that interests you and meets the requirements of the assignment.

FOCUS: Prewriting can be carried out in a variety of ways. You may start by making a list or a cluster of possible subjects. This activity may prompt you to write freely about some item from that list or cluster. Then you may do some research before focusing on a specific way to write about the subject. Once you've established a focus, or thesis, you may arrange your supporting information with an outline or some other graphic organizer.

THE BIG PICTURE: When prewriting, pay special attention to three traits of good writing: ideas, organization, and voice.

Ideas: Collect as much information as you can. The more you know about your subject, the easier it will be to write about it.

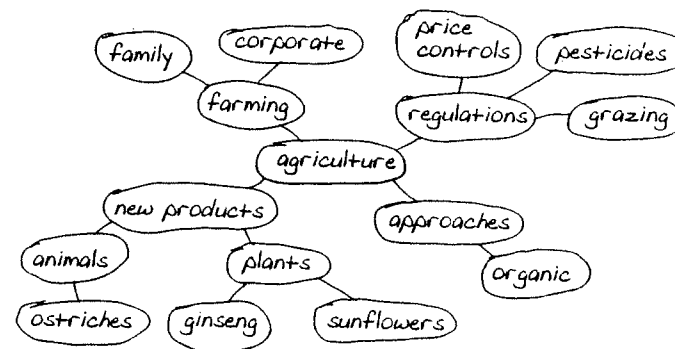
Organization: Decide on the best arrangement of the facts and details you have collected. There has to be a master plan that holds all of the information together. (See page 52.)

Voice: Make sure that your subject still interests you after you've done some collecting and planning. In order to write with voice and personality, you must have a sincere interest in your topic.

Using Selecting Strategies

The following strategies will help you select a specific subject for your writing. Read through the entire list before you choose a strategy to begin your subject search.

- 1. Journal Writing . . .** Write in a journal on a regular basis. Explore your personal feelings, develop your thoughts, and record events and happenings of each day. Underline ideas in your journal writing that you would like to explore further. (See pages 144-146.)
- 2. Freewriting . . .** Write nonstop for 5-10 minutes to discover possible writing ideas. Begin writing with a particular focus in mind that is somehow related to your assignment. (See page 45 for tips.)
- 3. Clustering . . .** Begin a cluster with a nucleus word related to your writing topic or assignment. Then cluster ideas around the nucleus word. Circle each idea you write and draw a line connecting it to the closest related idea. (See the sample below.)



★ After 3 or 4 minutes of clustering, scan your cluster for an idea to explore in a freewriting. (A specific writing subject should begin to emerge during this freewriting.)

- 4. Listing . . .** Begin with a thought or a key word related to your assignment and simply start listing words and ideas. Listing ideas with a group of friends or classmates (brainstorming) is also an effective way to search for writing ideas.

5. Reflecting, Participating, and Listening . . . Think about possible writing ideas as you read, as you ride (or drive) to school, and as you wait in the cafeteria line. Be alert for potential subjects as you visit with friends, or as you shop, work, or travel. Participate in activities related to your writing assignment. Also, talk to other people who are knowledgeable about your possible writing idea.

6. Using the “Essentials of Life Checklist” . . . Below you will find a checklist of the essential elements in our lives. The checklist provides an endless variety of subject possibilities. Consider the third category, *food*. It could lead to the following writing ideas:

- sensible eating habits
- fast-food overload
- a favorite type of food
- truth in labeling on food packages

ESSENTIALS OF LIFE CHECKLIST

clothing	communication	exercise/training
housing	purpose/goals	community
food	measurement	arts/music
education	machines	faith/religion
family	intelligence	trade/money
friends	agriculture	heat/fuel
love	environment	rules/laws
senses	plant life	science/technology
energy	land/property	work/occupation
entertainment	health/medicine	private/public life
recreation	literature/books	natural resources
personality	tools/utensils	freedom/rights

HELP FILE

Many writing assignments are related to a general subject area you are studying. Let's say, for example, you were asked to write a report about exercise and training, or about opportunities in education. Your writing task would be to focus on

Freewriting TIPS

The Process . . .

- Write nonstop and record whatever comes into your head. Write for at least 10 minutes if possible.
- Begin writing about a particular subject if you have one in mind. Otherwise, pick anything that comes to mind and begin writing.
- Don't stop to judge, edit, or correct your writing. Freewriting is exploratory writing, nothing more.
- Keep writing even when you seem to be drawing a blank. If necessary, switch to another subject, or write "I'm drawing a blank" until a new idea comes to mind.
- When a certain subject seems to be working, stick with it as long as you can. Record as many specific details about it as possible.
 - ★ Keep a small notebook close at hand, and write freely in it whenever you have an idea you don't want to forget, or write in it just for something to do. These freewritings will help you become a better writer.

The Result . . .

- Review your writing and underline ideas you like. These ideas may serve as starting points for writing assignments.
- Share your writing with your peers. You can learn a great deal by reading and reacting to the freewriting of your fellow writers.
- Continue freewriting about ideas you want to explore further. (You could approach this focused freewriting as a first draft for an assignment.)

Some Reminders . . .

- Thoughts are constantly passing through your head; you always have something on your mind.
- Freewriting helps you get these thoughts on paper.

Using Collecting Strategies

Once you've selected a subject, you need to gather details for writing. The activities and strategies that follow should help you do this. If you need to explore your writing ideas in great detail, and if time permits, use two or more of these strategies.

Gathering Your Thoughts

Freewriting @ At this point, you can approach freewriting in two ways. (1) You can do a focused freewriting, exploring your subject from a number of different angles. (2) You can approach your freewriting as if it were a quick version of the actual paper. A quick version will give you a good feel for your subject and will also tell you how much you know about it or need to find out.

Clustering @ Try clustering again, this time with your subject as the nucleus word. This clustering will naturally be more focused or structured than an initial clustering since you now have a specific subject in mind.

5 W's of Writing @ Answer the 5 W's—*Who? What? When? Where?* and *Why?*—to identify basic information about your subject. (Add *How?* to the list for even better coverage.)

Directed Writing @ Write whatever comes to mind about your subject, using one of the modes listed below. (Repeat the process as often as you need to, selecting a different mode each time.)

Describe it. What do you see, hear, feel, smell, taste . . . ?

Compare it. What is it similar to? What is it different from?

Apply it. What can you do with it? How can you use it?

Associate it. What connections between this and something else come to mind?

Analyze it. What parts does it have? How do they work together?

Argue for or against it. What do you like about it? Not like about it? What are its strengths and its weaknesses?

Directed Dialoguing @ Create a dialogue between two people in which your specific subject is the topic of the conversation. The two speakers should build on each other's comments about the subject.

Audience Appeal @ Select a specific audience to address in an exploratory writing. Consider a group of preschoolers, a live television audience, the readers of a popular teen magazine, the local school board. This writing will help you see your subject in new ways.

Questioning @ Ask questions to gather information about your subject. You can use the questions in the chart below if your subject falls into any of these three different categories: **problems** (student apathy), **policies** (grading), or **concepts** (student internships).

	Description	Function	History	Value
PROBLEMS	What is the problem? What are the signs of the problem?	Who or what is affected by it? What new problems may it cause in the future?	What is the current status of the problem? What or who caused it?	What is the significance? Why is it more (or less) important than other problems?
POLICIES	What type of policy is it? What are its most important features?	What is the policy designed to do? What is needed to make it work?	What brought this policy about? What are the alternatives to this policy?	Is the policy working? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
CONCEPTS	What type of concept is it? Who or what is related to it?	Who has been influenced by this concept? Why is it important?	When did it originate? How has it changed over the years?	What practical value does it hold? What is its social worth?

Researching Your Topic

Reading @ Refer to nonfiction books, magazines, pamphlets, and newspapers for information about your subject. Take notes as you read.

Surfing @ Explore the Internet for information about your writing idea. (See pages 332-335 for help.) Jot down Web addresses as you go.

Viewing and Listening @ Watch relevant television programs and videos or listen to tapes about your subject.

Talking to Others

Interviewing @ Interview an expert about your subject. Meet the expert in person, communicate by phone, or send questions to be answered. (See page 330 for more information on interviewing.)

Discussing @ Talk with your classmates, teachers, or other people to find out what they know about your subject. Take notes to help you remember the important things they say.

"Good writing is formed partly through plan and partly through accident."

—Ken Macrorie

A Closer Look at Prewriting

What should you do after you've gathered information about your writing idea? Well, you can either plan and write your first draft, or you can stop and consider how well you match up with your subject before you go any further.

Taking Inventory of Your Thoughts

After carefully considering the questions that follow, you will be ready to (1) move ahead with your writing or (2) change your subject.

Purpose: Does my subject meet the assignment requirements?
Am I writing to explain, describe, persuade, entertain, or retell?

Self: How do I feel about the subject?
Do I have enough time to develop this subject?

Subject: How much do I know about this subject?
Can I think of an interesting way to write about it?
Is additional information available?

Audience: Who are my readers?
How much do they already know about this subject?
How can I get them interested in my ideas?

Form and Style: How should I present my ideas—in a narrative, an essay, a report, or an article?
Can I think of an interesting way to begin or lead into my paper?



How much information do I have to collect before I write my first draft?

Forming Your Thesis Statement

After you have completed enough exploring and collecting, you should begin to develop a more focused interest in your subject. If all goes well, this interest will become the thesis of your writing. **A thesis statement identifies the focus for your writing.** It usually highlights a special condition or feature of the subject, expresses a specific feeling, or takes a stand.

State your thesis in a sentence that effectively expresses what you want to explore in your essay. Write as many versions as it takes to come up with a sentence that sets the right tone and direction for your writing. Use the following formula to write a thesis statement.

FORMULA

A specific subject
+ a specific condition, feeling, or stand
= an effective thesis statement.

Thesis Statement: **Young children exposed to low levels of lead**
(specific subject)
may face health problems later in life.
(specific condition)

SAMPLE THESIS STATEMENTS

Writing Assignment: Essay about opportunities in education
Specific Subject: High school internships
Thesis Statement: **High school internship programs** *(specific subject)*
benefit students in three ways *(specific features).*

Writing Assignment: Essay on the Civil War
Specific Subject: General George McClellan
Thesis Statement: **General George McClellan's**
overcautious tactics *(specific subject)*
prolonged the war *(specific feeling).*

Writing Assignment: Essay about an outdoor activity
Specific Subject: Use of barbed hooks for fishing
Thesis Statement: **Barbed hooks** *(specific subject)*
should be banned from fishing *(specific stand).*

Organizing Your Details

With a clear thesis in mind, you may need to design a writing plan before you start your first draft. Your plan can be anything from a brief list of ideas to a detailed sentence outline. (See page 108.) Use the guidelines that follow to help organize your details for writing.

1. **Study your thesis statement.** It may suggest a logical method of organization.
2. **Review the details that support your thesis.** See if an overall plan of organization begins to emerge.
3. **Consider the methods of organization listed below.**

Methods of Organization

Listed below are some useful ways to organize details in your writing. (See pages 100-103 for writing samples and pages 48-49 for organizers.)

- **Chronological order** (*time*) is effective for sharing personal narratives, summarizing steps, and explaining events.
- **Order of location** (*spatial*) is useful for many types of descriptions. Details can be described from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom, from edge to center, and so on.
- **Illustration** (*deductive*) is a method of arrangement in which you first state a general idea (thesis statement) and follow with specific reasons, examples, and facts.
- **Climax** (*inductive*) is a method of arrangement in which you present specific details followed by a general statement or a conclusion.
- **Compare/contrast** is a method of arrangement in which you compare one subject to another subject. In the process of your writing, you show how the subjects are alike and how they are different.
- **Cause/effect** is a type of arrangement that helps you make connections between a result and the events that came before it. Usually, you begin with a general statement giving the cause of something, and then you discuss a number of specific effects.
- **Problem/solution** is a type of arrangement in which you state a problem and explore possible solutions.
- **Definition or classification** is a type of arrangement that can be used to explain a term or a concept (a machine, a theory, a game, and so on). Begin by placing the subject in the appropriate *class*, and then provide details that show how your subject is different from and similar to others in the same class. (See pages 208-209.)

“All writing begins life as a first draft, and first drafts are never any good. They’re not supposed to be.”

—Patricia T. O’Conner

A Guide to DRAFTING

This is it—your first draft, your first complete look at a writing idea. All of your searching and planning have led up to this point. Write as much of your first draft as possible in the first sitting while all of your prewriting is still fresh in your mind. Think of drafting as the process of connecting all of the ideas that you have collected about your subject. Refer to your planning notes as you write, but be open to new ideas as they emerge. Keep these additional points in mind as you write:

- Concentrate on developing your ideas, not on producing a final copy.
- Include as much detail as possible.
- Continue writing until you make all of your main points, or until you come to a logical stopping point.

Preview

- Quick Guide
- Writing an Opening Paragraph
- Developing the Middle
- Bringing Your Writing to a Close

