

Prewriting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover what prewriting is, as well as explore some prewriting methods. The specific areas of focus include:

1. [The Prewriting Stage](#)
2. [Methods of Prewriting](#)
 - 2a. [Listing](#)
 - 2b. [Clustering](#)
 - 2c. [Free-Writing](#)

1. The Prewriting Stage

Have you ever sat at your computer, staring at a blank screen, totally unsure of what to write? That kind of experience can be so frustrating. Luckily, there are some tricks you can practice to help you prepare to write.

Writing isn't a product; it's a process that has many different stages, steps, and methods. To produce a finished, polished, beautiful piece of writing, you don't just sit down and write it. You go through many different steps and engage in a whole host of activities in order to turn an idea into a piece of text.

One of the most essential steps you can take is **prewriting**, which is part of the early development of a piece of writing. All writers engage in some form of prewriting, so to become a great writer, you need to understand the kinds of prewriting activities that you can try out before putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard.

Prewriting is an activity or set of activities that you might do as a writer to generate ideas for your paper. The reason writers engage in prewriting is to get a whole lot of ideas down on paper really quickly. This helps relieve the anxiety that might come along with a writing project or might help end writer's block if you have it.

The whole goal of this prewriting is to encourage thinking, which means it's also a time to remain open to all sorts of ideas, opinions, and possible directions for your writing project.



TERM TO KNOW

Prewriting

An activity or a set of activities that you do as a writer to generate ideas for your paper.

2. Methods of Prewriting

There are a few different ways you might facilitate prewriting. You might think over your topic while walking the dog, talk about it with your friends, or discuss your ideas with a professor or a peer.

But there are also systematic strategies that you can use to prewrite. Some, such as free-writing, listing, and clustering, are almost like games you play with yourself. Others, such as outlining, may be more like a way of organizing thoughts to prepare for writing.

An **outline** is a prewritten plan for an essay or other piece of writing, which generally includes ideas to be discussed and a structural organization. To get the ideas that you'll put in an outline, you might want to try some of these fun prewriting strategies first.



TERM TO KNOW

Outline

A pre-written plan for an essay or other piece of writing that generally includes the primary ideas to be discussed and a structural organization.

2a. Listing

Start by thinking about listing as one prewriting strategy. When you list, you just write things down as they come. You might think of a topic, set a timer for a few minutes, and then spend those minutes listing every word, phrase, image, or concept that comes to mind until the timer rings.

There aren't really any rules for listing. If a word or concept comes to your mind that seems silly, write it down anyway. Don't censor anything. If the thought doesn't seem relevant to your topic, still write it down. That connection could be useful later.

You'll sort through those thoughts once you're at a point in the writing process where you're starting to organize your thoughts into a paper outline.

IN CONTEXT

Your paper topic is human and animal relationships. The first thing you might think of is your own pet, if you have one. Once you write that down, you might start thinking about the difference between pets and other kinds of animals.

Some of these animals are working animals and some are just pets; you might then wonder what categories you could put animals in. What kind of work do animals do for humans? You could go on, but as you can see below, you'd already have a list forming of all the different thoughts that came up

as you sat and considered human-animal relations.

| Human-Animal Relations | |
|--------------------------|---|
| domesticated animals: | dogs, cats, horses, some birds |
| animal categories: | -pets -wild animals -working animals |
| working animals and pets | pets vs. other kinds of animals |
| can all animals be pets? | jobs: -transportation -food -testing |

Note that this list is not necessarily pointing out the connections between ideas; it's just free form.

One benefit of listing as a prewriting tool is that you can potentially transform these ideas into outlines that will help you organize your essay later in the process.

2b. Clustering

The disadvantage of listing is that it might not help you connect your thoughts or develop those networks of ideas. If you want to generate ideas like you did in listing, while also being more attentive to the connections between your ideas, you might want to try clustering.



STEP BY STEP

1. When you cluster, you start by writing down what your topic is in one word or short phrase. This might even be a topic that your professor gave you in the assignment. So you write that in the center of a piece of paper.
2. Next, just like you did when you were listing, let ideas come to you about this topic. Write down other words or phrases that are related to the topic in spots around the center word.
3. Then comes the step where you're going to connect those ideas. Draw a line from the center out to each of those ideas. Think about all of those words and phrases and their connections.
4. When you have another idea, write it down too. If it's closely related to the main topic, write it close to the center. If it's less relevant, put it farther away. If it's related to one of the other words, write it with a connecting line to that other word. Now you have an interconnected map of your ideas.

Clustering is a great tool for people who like to learn visually because it represents the paper that you'll eventually write in a visual fashion and helps you make connections between ideas to explore the whole network of thoughts that can be generated by any topic.

But again, you might also notice that this isn't as easy to turn into an outline as that linear list was.

2c. Free-Writing

When you're listing and clustering, you're focusing on short bursts of ideas—single words or phrases. In contrast, when you free-write, you might use full sentences and develop your ideas using a more narrative approach, which is a great way to get started on the writing process.

Free-writing works just like it sounds. You spend several minutes writing without pause about anything that relates to your topic, and you don't just have to focus on ideas here. You can write about the feelings that this topic brings up in you, about any concerns you might have regarding the topic, or really about anything else that's relevant to the whole writing process.

IN CONTEXT

Your topic focuses on the relationship between humans and animals. You may start off writing about why you like this topic and that leads you to thinking about the topic itself in more detail.

Because you are exploring what you personally find interesting about human-animal relations, you get the chance to home in on a particular focus. Then when you consider the variety of opinions that are possible about this focus, you can discover a connection that might not have originally occurred to you.

I want to talk about my dogs because I'm really interested in how dogs became domesticated. Can I write about the history? Maybe I should focus on why so many people love their dogs. Not everyone loves dogs! I bet they think loving dogs is a weird thing to do. Is it normal to "love" a dog? How did we evolve this way? How do I know my dog loves me back? I wonder if there are research studies that prove that dogs experience love for humans. What if there aren't! If they do love us, then are we family? What would that mean? Can any animal be family?

This is why free-writing is so useful—it helps writers explore any aspect of the topic that comes to them.

Since you are simply exploring, a lot of the writing may not be used directly in an outline or in your paper, but you may stumble on an important connection that otherwise may not have come to you!



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned why it's so important to think of writing as a process that begins with **the prewriting stage**. All writers engage in some form of prewriting.

When **listing** and **clustering**, the focus is on short bursts of ideas—single words or phrases. **Free-writing** is writing without pause about anything that relates to your topic without focusing on any specific idea or theme. Just write!

Good luck!

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