

Prewriting

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about prewriting and the way it is used for organizing thoughts, narrowing the focus of a writing project, and outlining or planning the essay. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Prewriting in the Writing Process

2. Narrowing Focus

3. Outlining Methods

3a. Traditional

3b. Less Defined

3c. Storyboarding

1. Prewriting in the Writing Process

There's a lot that has to happen before experienced writers actually begin the drafting process, and much of that work falls into the category of **prewriting**.

Prewriting is the planning and organizing that a writer does before actively beginning to write. It features several distinct phases or purposes, each of which will have to be tailored to a particular writing project.

Prewriting includes:

- Planning, conducting, and organizing the research that needs to be done before any real writing can begin.
- Narrowing down the writing project's focus and making sure it's one that can be fully explained given the time and space constraints on the writer or the writing project.
- Outlining the project, or making a plan for what to write.

It's important to do this kind of prewriting because the organizing and clarifying of thoughts and plans that it provides gives writers greater control over their projects and usually saves them time in the long run.



TERM TO KNOW

Prewriting

A stage in the writing process in which the writer generates ideas and creates a plan for the writing project prior to composing a first draft.

2. Narrowing Focus

One of the most important benefits a writer can get from prewriting is a narrow, manageable focus. It's important for the goals of a writing project to be realistic.

The most common way writers get into trouble with writing projects is that they bite off more than they can chew given the limitations put on their time and the number of allowed pages or words involved.

Keeping a focus narrow makes it possible to fully explain the ideas and fully answer the questions that drive an essay. There's nothing worse than a writing project that can't take into account the relevant details involved in its claim, or one that can't support the broad argument it's trying to make.

When planning an essay during the prewriting step of the writing process, a writer should consider her audience and purpose, then ask whether the focus of the argument is tight enough that she will be able to do it justice in the time and space allowed.

This will help the writer narrow in on a working thesis—one that can be used as the basis of the outline and, eventually, of the essay itself.



BIG IDEA

A main reason why writers bother with these early stages of the writing process is to help narrow their focus and keep that focus during the rest of the writing process.

3. Outlining Methods

Once you've got your focus narrow enough to be manageable, the next thing to do is create an **outline** for your essay. Outlines vary depending on the writer and the writing project at hand.

Generally speaking, outlines are the prewritten plans for an essay or other piece of writing and generally include a working thesis and the primary ideas to be discussed, as well as some form of structural plan or organization. Metaphorically speaking, an outline is the blueprint, not the house!

Outlining makes for a stronger piece of writing, as well as a faster, more focused writing process. There are multiple kinds of outlines, just as there are multiple ways of making them. In this lesson, we will cover three different forms that an outline can take.

As you will see, each of these three methods of outlining would contain more or less the same information and be equally useful in writing the essay. Here, as in many other aspects of the writing process, it all comes down

to personal preference or assignment requirements.



TERM TO KNOW

Outline

The prewritten plan for an essay or other piece of writing that generally includes a working thesis, the primary ideas to be discussed, and the planned structural organization.

3a. Traditional

The first type is a traditional outline, which is highly detailed and includes headings and subheadings.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are writing an argument about health insurance, and your thesis is that universal health care is better than trusting for-profit companies to make the right decisions about their patients. You might make an outline that plans out the three main headings you'd need to cover:

1. Problems with existing care. You may include, for example, people who have been denied coverage because their needs are too expensive. Or, you may discuss how companies target mostly the young, healthy people on whom they'll make the most money.
2. Ways that a nonprofit system might help America. You'd likely use information about other countries, like France or Canada, that already use universal health care, and how much better their health care system seems to be for the people who actually need it.
3. Reasons that the system hasn't caught on in America. This heading could encompass business opposition and a general fear of government control over something as important and vital as health care.

3b. Less Defined

Another form of outline, one a little less rigid and detail oriented, might work in certain circumstances.

IN CONTEXT

You might simply write out your thesis, stating that universal health care should be implemented in America, then quickly note down any reasons and presumed evidence.

Again, this may include the problems you see with for-profit companies working in the industry, how much better other countries seem to be at taking care of themselves, and the reasons why Americans don't seem predisposed toward universal health care.

3c. Storyboarding

A third, perhaps less common, form of outlining is called storyboarding. This involves drawing a series of panels or squares with notes and images detailing a writing plan.

IN CONTEXT

For the working thesis on universal health care, you could break up your outline into three pieces or panels:

1. Problems with the current health care system
2. Possible alternatives to the current system
3. Reasons why universal health care hasn't been adopted



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **prewriting in the writing process**, a stage that helps with **narrowing a focus** down to something manageable within the constraints of the writing project's rhetorical situation. Prewriting also involves outlining, or creating a plan for later drafts. Three possible **outlining methods** are **traditional** outlines, **less defined** outlines, and **storyboarding**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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Prewriting

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