



## Prewriting Tips and Methods

Prewriting is the most liberating stage of the writing process. Using the techniques described in this section, you can glide across all the subjects that interest you, or you can burrow vigorously into one subject, seeing how much you know about it. These techniques are liberating because they are quick, effective, and relatively easy. They are also invaluable because they can help you

- find a topic,
- recall how much you know about it, and
- discover a direction for your planning and drafting.

Keep in mind that prewriting techniques can be used throughout the writing process. They are especially good if you can't find the right words to communicate an idea.

### A. Listing Ideas

You probably create lists all the time. You can use lists to find and explore a topic for writing. Lists are wonderful because they are quick to create and flexible. You can write them anywhere, like the back of your checkbook or the back of your hand, and at any time, like the hour you may have between classes.

You can use a list of ideas to **find a topic**, creating a broad list of possibilities that you can think about more carefully. You only need to write down one or two words, or a short phrase, to catch the idea; then, move on. As you write, keep this advice in mind:

- **Push past the obvious.** If you can create ten topics easily, then aim for thirty. The additional ideas will usually be more specific to you and therefore more interesting.
- **Don't overanalyze.** If you worry whether readers will like these ideas, or whether you know enough about them, you will cheat yourself of challenging and unique writing topics. You can evaluate your ideas after you have created your list.

You can also list ideas to **explore a topic**. By taking an idea from one list and creating a new list from it, you can see how much you already know, what items you need more information about, and which aspects of the topic might be more productive for you to explore.

### B. Listing Thesis Statements

Your thesis is usually a one- or two-sentence statement of the overall point or insight you want readers to learn by the end of your essay. If you already know a particular subject really well, then listing thesis statements can give you a chance to focus that knowledge. Writing thesis statements can also direct your writing, by helping you decide how to structure your essay and what information to include or cut.

1. **Concentrate on a specific point or insight about your subject.** Thesis statements like "I want to write about snowboarding" are no more focused than "snowboarding." A thesis like "I want to write about the three major styles of snowboarding" is better because the focus is narrower. However, thesis statements usually promise some point or insight *about* that subject. A thesis like "The style snowboarders choose depends on their terrain and equipment" now draws the three styles together; it promises to show how each style is dependent on terrain and equipment.
2. **Don't worry about perfecting the statements yet.** At this stage, you are still prewriting. Your thesis will be tested as you plan and draft. Is the thesis too broad or too narrow to write about effectively? Will supporting this thesis require you to do additional research? As you get further into the process, you can always revise your thesis to adjust its scope or to change its direction.



C. Freewriting

We usually assume that we must know exactly what we want to say before we begin writing. Experienced writers reject this idea. They know that freewriting, using timed writing sessions to explore a given topic, can often kick start their thinking. Freewriting can help them discover their ideas or find just the right words to crystallize existing ideas.

To freewrite, you begin by giving yourself a topic and a set period of time, anywhere from three to six minutes. During that time you write or type *nonstop* about that topic—that means no pausing to look out the window or to scratch yourself. You write down everything that comes to mind. Some students even turn off their monitors while they freewrite in order to avoid the temptation to worry about grammar or other details.

Freewriting for a specific period of time can liberate you because it discourages you from editing and drafting at the same time. You are writing continuously, so you must write before you know exactly what you want to say and at a pace too fast for reflection. As a result, you leave behind that little editorial voice in your head that second guesses everything you write, from word choice and grammar to the appropriateness of your ideas. The hope is that freewriting will give you the words or ideas that you can then begin to clarify, organize and polish.

Here are a few suggestions to help you freewrite:

- **Writing nonstop means nonstop.** If you can't think of anything to say, write "I don't know what to say," "bla, bla, bla" or whatever to keep that language flowing. Even as you write down this empty language, your brain is still processing the topic and new ideas or things to say will come to you. Ninety percent of what you write in a freewriting session might be junk, but it is often junk you need to get past to get to those one or two great ideas.
- **Freewriting works best in stages.** Freewriting can be draining, so you may want to limit your writing to short periods of time. You can then reread what you wrote, pick up on a promising idea, and explore that idea further in a new freewrite.
- **Keep your purpose in mind.** You can use freewriting at any point in the writing process, depending on what you want to do. Do you want to discover how much you know about your subject before you begin drafting? Are you trying to find the right words to communicate an idea, or do you want to follow an interesting new idea, without actually developing it in your draft right away? You can use freewriting in each of these situations to quickly jump start your thinking.

D. Questioning

We don't ask nearly enough questions. Questions express our natural curiosity. Asking them encourages us to think actively about our experiences.

1. **You can use questions to orient yourself in a writing situation.** Who will be reading your essay? What do they need to know? Why is the essay worth reading? Asking questions like these will make you savvier to ways you can communicate more effectively. For example, being mindful of your audience can encourage you to use examples relevant to their experiences.
2. **You can use questions to expand and deepen your awareness of a subject.** Most of the subjects you will write about are rich and complex. Even a subject as bland as gardens begins to flower under questions like "What is the best way to construct a garden?", "Do gardens have the same purpose?", and "Have gardens always been viewed historically in the same ways?" Push yourself to write at least a dozen questions on your subject, so that you'll go beyond the obvious.
3. **You can use questions to discover a meaningful research topic.** What do you want to know, and how can you find out?

Of course, you have to answer your questions. Creating questions only alerts you to what you need to find out; it doesn't give you material to put into a draft. You can do research or other prewriting techniques to begin answering your questions. But first, you have to ask!

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