



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

Prewriting Strategies for Exploring Ideas

What is Prewriting?

Prewriting refers to all the ways you begin your writing project. It includes coming up with ideas, organizing those ideas, and making a plan for your paper.

Exploring ideas can include:

- doing research
- thinking
- talking
- freewriting
- listing (sometimes called brainstorming)
- clustering (sometimes called webbing or mind-mapping)

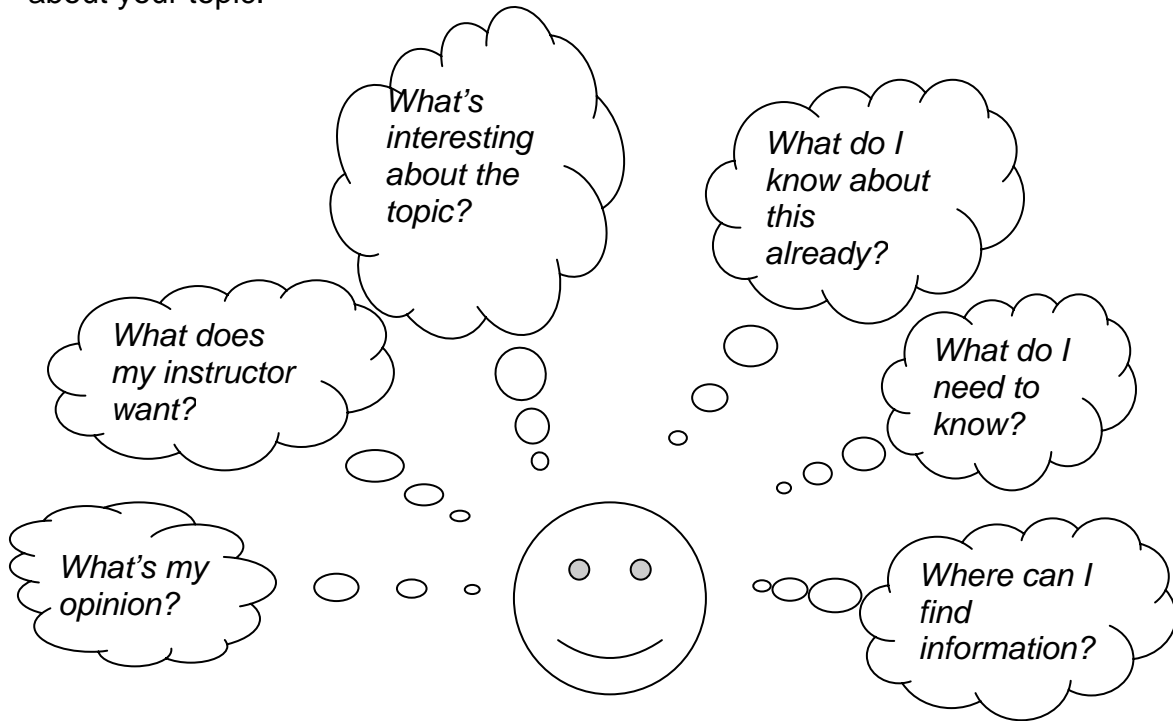
It can also include any other way that you have for creating and writing down ideas for your paper.

Why Bother with Prewriting?

1. **Prewriting can help you think.** Writing is a creative act of communication. Communicating means you have to have something to say, and that implies thinking. Unless you are someone who can hold the entire piece of writing in your mind, putting your ideas down on paper (or the computer) helps you collect and develop your ideas.
2. **Prewriting can help you have well-organized, clear writing.** Trying to write an outline or a draft before you have recorded any ideas is difficult. Using prewriting strategies helps you to come up with ideas, organize those ideas and develop a plan for your paper. Having a plan will lead to a well-structured writing assignment.
3. **Prewriting can save you time.** This may seem strange because you have to spend time doing the prewriting. However when you put ideas on paper, you have something to work with to create an outline, and an outline in turn makes writing your first draft easier. Furthermore, if your essay is better organized in the first draft, you can save time when you come to revise and edit your paper.
4. **Prewriting can produce better writing.** The process of prewriting pushes you to think and generate support for your ideas. When your ideas are better supported, you are likely to have a better piece of writing.

What are Some Techniques for Exploring Ideas?

This is at the heart of the creative part of writing. There are many ways to come up with ideas; you need to find the ways that work for you. You probably already use some prewriting techniques. For example, you probably begin by thinking about your topic.



1. Talk about your topic.

After you have done some thinking, it's useful to talk about your topic with another student, or you might try to explain it to a Learning Centre tutor or someone at home. Talking about your topic and expressing your ideas can help you develop your ideas even if your listener doesn't know anything about the subject. Getting your listener to ask you questions is especially helpful.

2. Write down your ideas.

Start to make point form notes of your ideas. If you don't usually begin to write your ideas down at this point, start to make this a part of your writing process. Carry a piece of paper around with you for several days and write down ideas as they occur to you. Don't worry about putting your ideas in sentences; just write enough to remind you of the thought.

If you are writing a research paper, you will need to spend time reading and taking notes on the articles and books that you are using. Whether you are taking notes using a computer, writing out notes by hand, or highlighting or writing on copies, make sure you write down your own ideas and opinions as

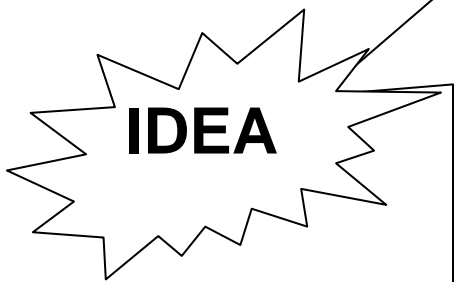
they occur to you. Put brackets around them or use some other system to show which are your thoughts and which are the authors' ideas. (For further help on writing a research paper, see the list of suggested Learning Centre handouts at the end of this handout.)

3. Set time aside and use a formal strategy for exploring ideas.

There are a number of specific strategies for exploring ideas, and you may want to use several of them. The key is to put aside your inner critic or editor, and write down all your ideas. Don't worry about whether or not you want them all to end up in your paper. You'll figure that out later. Begin by rereading your notes, and then try one or more of the following strategies. (If you want more suggestions, you could try checking the web and googling "prewriting strategies" for more suggestions.)

Listing:

Listing as a strategy for exploring ideas simply means writing down everything you can think of about your topic. Don't write in sentences; that takes too long. Don't worry about the order of the ideas, or whether some ideas are general and others are details. You can sort that out later. Include questions you have about the topic. Don't worry about whether what you've written is sensible, or worded correctly – that part comes later. If you get stuck, go back to one of your ideas and elaborate on it. Ask yourself questions about your ideas to help you generate other ideas.



Why? Why is this the case? Why is it important?
When? When did this happen? When does it matter?
Where? Where could this happen again?
Who? Who's involved? Who's affected? Who cares?
What? What does this mean? What are other points of view?
How? How has it changed over time? How does it relate to X?

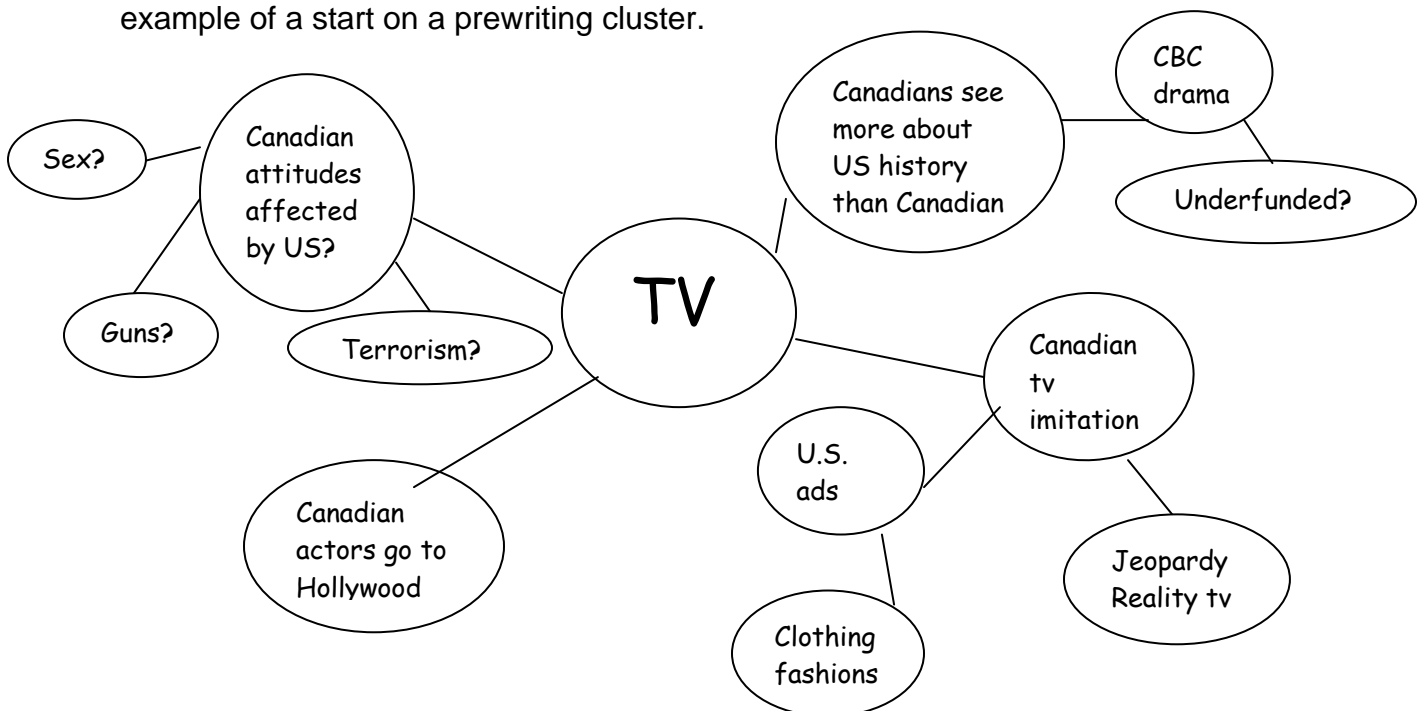
Freewriting

Freewriting can be a good way to explore your topic. You need many sheets of paper and a timer. To begin, write your topic at the top of a page, and for 5 minutes write without stopping. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or punctuation, and don't stop to read what you have written or make any corrections. If you reach a point where you can't think of anything to write, don't stop. Instead, write your last thought over and over until you have something else to write. At the end of the five minutes, read over what you have written and underline any parts you think have interesting ideas, or ideas that might be useful

to your paper. Write these in point form at the top of a new sheet of paper, and then freewrite again for another 5 minutes. What you will have at the end of several freewritings will not be something that can be turned into a paragraph or an outline for your essay. But you are likely to have more focus and ideas that can be used.

Clustering

Like listing and freewriting, clustering helps you explore your ideas and expand on them. To begin to cluster, write your topic in one or a few words in the centre of the page. Then go on to write words that you think of when you think about that topic. For example, if your assignment was to write a paper about the influence of the United States on Canadian culture, and you had decided to write about the American impact on Canadian television, you might write TV in the centre of the page. Circle "TV" and then write all the words that you associate with this topic, even words that at first may seem to be random. Write quickly, circling each word, grouping words around your central word, or connecting them to whatever word you associated them with. When some new idea occurs to you, radiate it from the centre word or from any word or phrase that the new idea flowed from. When you feel you have exhausted the ideas flowing from a word, go back to the word in the centre of the page and begin again. Below is an example of a start on a prewriting cluster.



Often, writers find that clustering helps them narrow their topic. Then, cluster again, this time starting with the narrowed topic at the centre of the page. In the

example above, this might look like taking “Canadian TV imitation” as the topic and working to expand those ideas through more clustering.

Categorizing

This method of exploring ideas is particularly useful for assignments in which some type of comparison is required. Categorizing can also help you identify the views expressed by the authors of the articles and books you are reading, which may lead you to find the thesis for your own paper. Below is part of one example which shows how categorizing can be used to compare ideas and keep track of your own responses.

Topic: World Aid

	Author A	Author B	My View & Ques.
Who Needs Aid?	Bottom billion of world's pop.	Needy countries should decide	Who/where are bottom billion?
Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - aid doesn't go to most needy - World Bank not consulting countries - WB demands on poor economies causing problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - World Bank serves interests of donor countries → trade for aid demands - restructuring demands ruin economies of receiving countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Would countries give aid if not attached to trade agreements? - What are the aid-trade agreements? - is a global body like WB needed?
Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - W. Bank should consult with the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poor countries should create a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do poor countries trust

What comes next?

The purpose of all this is to help you think and get your ideas down on paper. Continue using one or more of these strategies until you feel you have explored each idea by asking yourself questions about it. Try to schedule your time so you can leave your ideas and come back to them later, the next day, if possible. If you are doing a research paper, it would be a good idea to review the notes you took and make sure you have included ideas you think are important. (You may find that you recognize areas you need to research more.) When you return

to your ideas, add any new thoughts you have as you read what you have written.

Now that you have explored your topic, you will be clearer on the direction of your ideas. Once you have finished, read your ideas over and look for the ideas you can explain or defend -- the ideas that could be at the centre of your paper. Try to write in one sentence the central idea you want to present to your reader. It helps if you come up with several of these sentences, expressed slightly differently each time, so you can select the one you feel is the clearest. This is your working thesis statement. For more help on writing thesis statements, see the Learning Centre handouts, WR2.42 *Finding a Strong Thesis* and WR4.20 *The Thesis Statement*.

With your ideas and a working thesis statement written, you can begin to organize your points: select the relevant ideas, group similar ones, expand ones which need further support, and decide on the order in which you will present them. For more help on the organizing stage of writing – a key stage in the prewriting process – see the Learning Centre handout, WR2.40 *Prewriting Strategies for Organizing Ideas*.

Resources

Some other Learning Centre resources that might help you:

Overviews

WR2.10 The Writing Process – A Checklist

WR2.14 The Research Paper

WR2.16 Research Papers: How Word Processing Can Help

WR4.30 The Essay

Prewriting

WR2.34 Prewriting Questions for Exploring Ideas

WR2.38 The History Research Essay: Getting Started

WR2.40 Prewriting Strategies for Organizing Ideas

WR2.42 Finding a Strong Thesis

WR2.46 The History Paper: Developing your Thesis

WR2.52 Outline Example

WR2.54 Making an Essay Outline from the Top Down

WR2.56 Outlining a Multipoint Paragraph