When your instructor assigns a project or your supervisor assigns a writing task in the workplace, it’s nice to have prewriting strategies to help you get started. Nothing is more frustrating than staring at a computer screen trying to wait for inspiration to hit you with an impending deadline hanging over you.

This Writing Center tutorial defines prewriting and explores a variety of prewriting strategies:

- What is prewriting?
- Freewriting
- Brainstorming
- Bubbling
- Clustering
- Listing
- Informal Outlining
- Cubing
- Prewriting Application

Prewriting, also known as discovery, invention, topic exploration, and a host of other terms that speak to the usefulness of this phase of writing, helps writers to select a topic or explore a topic. When beginning to write a paper, prewriting techniques offer ways to understand the topic more fully. Before researching a topic from outside perspectives, it is important to research your own thoughts, knowledge, and experiences to see how familiar you already are with a topic.

One common misconception that students have is that they should already know what they want to write (form those ideas and sentences in their heads) before beginning to peck away at the typewriter or pull out that pencil. An alternate perspective is that the physical act of writing and typing allows one to create meaning (Figure 1).

Many writers get blocked when they attempt to form the perfect thoughts in their minds and transfer those thoughts on paper. But when they let themselves go, allow themselves to create a mess by prewriting, the ideas may flow. Brilliance appears, clear topics and directions emerge, and the block is dashed away.

Prewriting allows you to write without limitations and censors. Giving yourself this freedom may not only inspire you to get writing, but it may also help you discover those ideas that have been hidden away in your mind.

Think of prewriting as your bag of tricks to get started on any writing project. You may find some techniques more comfortable and successful than others, so try each in order to discover which works best for you. The most important thing to remember is to let yourself go. Try not to make
judgments on the ideas and wording as they appear on the paper or screen. There’s always time to judge later. In the midst of prewriting, don’t censor yourself. Just write.

**Freewriting**

Freewriting allows you to write, usually for a specific period of time, without stopping. The ideas should just flow from your mind to the paper (or keyboard). It is your stream of consciousness. Here’s how it works:

- Set a timer for 10-15 minutes.
- Then, begin writing and don’t stop until the timer goes off. That means don’t stop to correct spelling or to consider and ponder what you wrote; don’t stop for anything.
- Some practitioners suggest that you should not stop and backspace to correct typing or erase misspellings, as this act of editing might interrupt the flow of thought.
- It is also a good idea to have a phrase in mind for times when you get stuck, like typing “stuck, stuck, stuck” over and over again until your mind starts rolling.

There are many benefits to free writing. First, you clear your mind of clutter that might be preventing you from getting your ideas out. It’s okay to write much more than you will actually use in the paper. Remember, the process of writing will help you discover ideas, so write as much as you can. You can always cut material later. Freewriting gives you a strategy to begin writing.

Besides just getting the clutter out, freewriting can help you discover seeds of inspiration. You might find an interesting idea that you never knew was tucked in your brain or consciousness. Out that idea pops in a free writing exercise.

Below is a sample (unedited) freewrite:

**Online learning**

So my assignment is to write a paper about the pros and cons of online learning that is learning. But I haven’t been an online student for very long. What do I know about this topic? It’s been ages since a that I was a traditional student. I think one thing that was appealing about online learning is that I could do it whenever I want to. I wasn’t or I’m not made to keep a particular schedule, come to class at a particular time. I just have to make sure that I get the assignments completed, finish my readings, keep up and turn things in team. Of course, that is also a challenge. I have to be self motivated. No one is reminding me every other day in person that I have assignments due. I have to make an effort to get into my class each day and see what’s going on and keep yp. But I think there are great possibility possibilities for online learning in the future. I keep thining of my daughter in high school. There are tons of things she is interested in, but the school curriculum is pretty limited. If she could pick and choose classes that interest her and that challenge her from online schools, she would love it! She is so ingrained in the online environment anyway. Her friends and family are mostly online and she keeps up with current events that way too. There just seems to be so many more opportunities to reach out to folks online. And what if you live in a really rural area that is far away from a
traditional university or college. Online would be perfect! I wonder how difficult it is to keep the standards high and consistent at online institutions. I wonder, I'm stuck, stuck, stuck, stuck, I lost my train of thought. Do you think it will come back? I hope so, I was on a roll. Oh, yes, that's it. I wonder how hard it is to get accredited. And I wonder how people do hands-on learning – practicums and health fields that need students to have so many hours working in a facility to get their training. How does that work with online learning? My time's up!

To see the freewrite in action, click this link: [http://tinyurl.com/freewrite-sample](http://tinyurl.com/freewrite-sample)

The five-minute freewriting session above appears to be a giant mess at first glance. However, something interesting emerges. The student begins thinking about general ideas related to online learning – flexibility, student motivation – but then turns to a personal issue that online learning could affect – her daughter's high school education. The possibilities of tailoring education to a high school student's learning preferences and interests, changing the system of education quite dramatically, emerges from the freewrite. Perhaps the student has an avenue for researching the topic.

Find your inspiration through a freewriting session!

You probably brainstorm every day. When you need to run by the grocery store to pick up some items on the way home from work, you brainstorm. When you sit down and think of all the things you need to do in a day, you brainstorm. Brainstorming is simply making a list of the ideas, words, phrases, etc. that come to mind about a topic. The most important thing with brainstorming, as with all discovery methods, is to avoid censoring yourself. Just list. And don’t forget to let that list get messy.

- As with freewriting, set a specific amount of time, perhaps 10-15 minutes, to brainstorm in order to allow your mind to let go and list without restraint.
- Consider brainstorming with someone else, talking through ideas while your brainstorming partner records (Figure 2).
- Whether you decide to brainstorm on paper or out loud, this prewriting strategy is a healthy way to get your mind working toward a topic or further development.

Here is a sample brainstorming list that a student used to discover ideas for an assignment about her dream job:

**Dream Job**

Day care

Preschool
In-home facility
Be my own boss
Care for children of low-income families
Network with other day cares
Finances to start the business
Support for tuition
Government grants
Network with child advocacy agencies
Curriculum and state standards
Advertising
Preparing my home
Help from family
Need for child care in our area
What’s the average income?
Success rates in this area
Inclusion

This brainstorming list helped the student discover some areas to research and to write about her future career in an in-home day care facility. She began thinking of the type of center she would like to create, the funding she will need to start her venture, and the support she can receive from local resources.

Ideally, the student will select a topic and possibly some subtopics from this brainstorming session to brainstorm in a separate list. She can focus her next exploration on a possible major supporting point of the paper, like the financial considerations for a day care owner.

Bubbling, like freewriting, is a great technique for developing a clearer idea of where you are going with your topic. Bubbling creates a visual map of your ideas and thoughts, graphically organizing the relationships between those ideas. This is a great technique for people who are visual learners. Here is how it works: Pick a word or phrase as your topic. In this example, the student used *childhood obesity*. 

![Childhood Obesity](image-url)
Now think about some ideas relating to the topic. For example, you might want to look into the causes, effects, or solutions of this problem in America.

Continue by adding on to these new circles.

And so on. Bubbling "maps" can grow quite large and complicated (imagine if everything from the freewrite and brainstorm were added here), but they are a great way to generate ideas and see the relationships between ideas. They are also helpful for organizing your ideas later on because concepts that should be linked together in the paper will be clustered together on the bubble map.

This prewriting technique is very similar to bubbling: You take a main idea, in this example "horror movies," and write it in the center of the page, screen, or board. You then branch out sub-ideas (and sub-sub ideas) until you have filled up the area with a huge web of ideas. Here is an example of clustering, which is basically bubbling without drawing the circles:
Table 1. Clustering as an effective prewriting strategy on the topic of horror films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Studios</th>
<th>Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s Hammer films</td>
<td>Who watches?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current profitable studios</td>
<td>Differences among age? Gender?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Horror movies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past/classic movies</th>
<th>Newer movies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Nightmare on Elm Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankenstein</td>
<td>Halloween sequels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dracula</td>
<td>Friday 13th sequels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolfman</td>
<td>Texas Chainsaw</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1950s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Blob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Them!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other creature flicks**

**1970s**

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halloween</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday the 13th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evil Dead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see from our bubbling and clustering examples, we are starting to generate some organization while we prewrite. Listing is another great way to organize as you prewrite. If you like creating lists for everyday tasks, you will want to try listing when you prepare to write a paper. Here is an example of listing using the horror movie topic:
### Table 2
Listing as an effective prewriting strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audiences</th>
<th>Why do they watch?</th>
<th>Favorites</th>
<th>Dislikes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male (what percentage of total audience?)</strong></td>
<td>To be scared</td>
<td>Creepy creatures: <em>Alien</em></td>
<td><em>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>To relax and escape stress</td>
<td>Classics: <em>Dracula, Frankenstein, Wolfman</em></td>
<td><em>Candyman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To compare written horror books with movie adaptations</td>
<td><em>Psycho</em> Antagonist: <em>Silence of the Lambs, Halloween</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To see how special effects look</td>
<td>*Supernatural: <em>Nightmare on Elm Street, The Ring</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Informal Outlining**

Outlining is a terrific prewriting strategy to try, but do not be concerned about the formal elements, like whether to use Roman numerals (I, II, III) or Arabic (1, 2, 3). Instead, focus on generating ideas and getting a notion of structure. You can choose to write full sentences or simple phrases, and you should move ideas around as the structure becomes apparent. Here is an example of an outline using the topic of horror movies:

I. Who watches horror movies?
   A. Adult males?
   B. Adult females?
   C. Couples?
   D. Certain age demographics?
II. Why do we watch horror movies?
A. To be scared, thrilled
B. To relax
C. To be first to see and tell friends
D. To enjoy special effects

III. What types are popular?
A. Series
1. Nightmare on Elm Street (Freddy)
2. Halloween (Michael Myers)
3. Friday the 13th (Jason)
B. Supernatural
1. Creepy creatures
2. Psychotic criminal

Cubing is a technique that allows you to look at a subject in 6 different ways (like the 6 sides of a cube). It is a way to explore your topic fully and to help you realize what you know and what you don’t know about your topic.

When you cube your topic, you are researching your topic by delving into your memories and experiences in the following ways:

**Describe it** – When you describe your topic, you will examine it through your five senses. What does it look like, feel like, sound like, taste like? What is the texture? What is the size?

**Compare it** – When you compare your topic, think about what it is similar to and different from. You could compare physical elements, purpose, functions, usefulness, or other points.

**Associate it** – When you associate your topic, discover what it makes you think of. How does it connect to or remind you of another topic?

**Analyze it** – When you analyze your topic, consider the parts of the topic and how those parts relate to each other. What is it made of? Where does it come from and where is it going?

**Apply it** – When you apply your topic, consider how it is useful to individuals, groups, society as a whole, the environment, the economy, or a host of other institutions. What can you do with your topic?
Argue it – When you argue your topic, consider all of the arguments associated with it. You might consider political, ethical, social, economic, philosophical, or other areas of argument. Once you have described, compared, associated, analyzed, applied, and argued your topic, you should have a good idea of what you know and don’t know about the topic and be well on your way to finding a direction or focus for your drafting.

Below is a sample cubing session a student used to learn more about the topic homeschooling.

Homeschooling

Describe – setting could vary daily
• Worksheets at the kitchen table
• Field trips to historic sites, museums, community organizations, government monuments and offices
• Online curriculum
• Parks programs for recreation – sports, art, dance, music
• Instruction time varies daily and according to availability of resources
• Mom or dad providing instruction
• Independent reading
• Blend of learning and family living

Compare to traditional schooling
• Both provide a specific curriculum and require teaching, reflection, and assessment
• Home school could be organized around the interests of the child and the environment of the family; traditional school is organized by a set curriculum and the school calendar.
• With home school, parents are responsible for ensuring the child has a full and rich educational experience; with traditional schooling, the school is responsible for providing the instruction according to standards set by the state, city, or district.
• With home school, social interaction among peers must be sought out; with traditional schools, peer interaction occurs daily.
• With home school, the parents will be financially responsible for the cost of curriculum; with traditional schools, tax dollars take care of the cost of curriculum.
Associate homeschooling

- Intelligent, independent kids
- Parents encouraging religious education
- Exploration
- Driven parents
- Perceived problems in traditional school settings

Analyze homeschooling

- Homeschooling may take children out of the traditional school setting, but they could still be engaged in the academic community.
- The parent’s role may change once he or she begins homeschooling.
- The line between home and school might blend together. Do home experiences become teaching experiences and vice versa?
- What are the effects of a child’s encouragement to explore areas of interest with guidance from the parent/teacher?

Apply homeschooling

- Homeschooling might be a good option for students in smaller and poorer school districts interested in pursuing studies that are not available in traditional schools.
- New technologies make homeschooling possible for more students (curriculum delivery online).
- Parents become more aware of the education their children need and how to provide their child’s education through homeschooling.

Arguments associated with homeschooling

- Homeschoolers lacking social interaction
- Does homeschooling curriculum hold up to state and local standards of education?
- Are parents isolating their kids when they home school them?
- Is the role of teacher a healthy role for a parent to play?

When you begin your next writing assignment, try a few of the freewriting techniques explained here. And since the writing process is a recursive, meaning you will revisit phases as you write and revise, use your new bag of prewriting tricks any time you are trying to develop content or rewrite sections of your project.