

Take the Plunge with These Pre-Writing Techniques

An Adult Studies Center Workshop Presented for Centenary University

Principle Strategies and Techniques Presented

Prewriting Defined and Explained

In the movie *Finding Forrester*, Sean Connery plays a highly skilled, elderly writer who tells his young protégé: “You write your first draft with your heart. You rewrite with your head.” Prewriting is an essential part of the process by which you write a first draft. For present purposes, let us say that it consists of two activities (or halves) that can be engaged in the order that best suits your intent as a writer.

The first half of prewriting is called idea-mapping. During this stage, you are drawing a large map of ideas and themes that all branch out from one central idea or source. The second half of prewriting is called freewriting. This is the exploratory and oftentimes unorganized writing that is done when we first get our ideas down on paper. Quite often, it is most effective when performed without interruption – that is, when you temporarily suspend the editing-related faculties of the mind, all with the intent of generating as much written material as possible. You are writing whatever ideas come to mind, all without stopping.

Subsequent Strategies and Techniques

#1. Whether you’re idea-mapping or freewriting, prewriting is literary brainstorming with few restrictions. It is your chance to “warm up” on the page and generate the raw material that you’ll be working with during later drafts. Prewriting is also an activity through which we can rediscover and rethink *what* we actually believe and why, so it has the often-overlooked benefit of being a mirror that we can hold up to our beliefs.

#2. Prewriting is a lot like the old art of panning for gold. You have to begin with the knowledge that most of what you scoop up in your pan is going to be silt – that a lot of your initial writing, outlining, and general brainstorming *will* contain gold, but will mostly be composed of disposable literary warm-up. While this warm-up is as necessary as the actual warm-up you’d do before competing in an athletic event, you probably won’t be using all of it in your final draft. This principle holds true whether you’re prewriting with or without the use of outside texts.

#3. The intellectual and aesthetic strengths of your later drafts will be derived in large part from the groundwork that you set down during prewriting. However, it can be difficult for some students to write without a pre-set structure and goal set in place. If you feel that you belong in this group, try to acknowledge that structures and goals must be discovered or created at some point, and that prewriting is the stage in which we do that discovery and creation. With this critical fact in mind during prewriting, you do not need to “start at the beginning” or “lead-off with a thesis sentence,” because prewriting is the process by which you will discover and develop those critical aspects of your writing projects.

#4. Note that the best and most unique, convincing thesis statements are made well after you have generated a good deal of material to work with. After all, a paper that analyzes a specific idea within Carver’s “One More Thing” is going to be far more effective than a paper asserting the vague generality that “One More Thing” is a strong short story. This logic can be applied to any writing topic that you could encounter for any assignment. However, the only way that you will attain this level of specificity is through broad and thorough ventures into prewriting via idea-mapping and freewriting.