

Four Prewriting Strategies For Writers Of All Ages

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When you need to turn a blank page into a brilliant essay, paper or presentation, try these prewriting exercises.

- They are easy, quick, and adaptable to any writing assignment.
- They are certain to generate ideas, and organize your thinking.
- They will inspire you to clarify and refine your writing.

Try the four below and see which works best for you!

1) **Free writing**

Free writing is a process of generating a great deal of information by writing non-stop. It allows you to focus on a specific topic, but forces you to write so quickly that you are unable to edit any of your ideas.

- Time yourself! Free write on the assignment or general topic for at least 15 minutes non-stop.
- Force yourself to continue writing even if nothing specific comes to mind.
- Don't overthink it.

- Do not worry about grammar, spelling or even about making sense.
- Don't judge what you write -- just get down as much as possible in the timed period.

After you've finished free writing, look back over what you have written and highlight the most prominent and interesting ideas. Then, if you like, you can begin all over again, with a tighter focus.

Take a look at the following example, which demonstrates the free writing method for the prompt “*Where Should I Apply to College?*”

Notice the writer is unconcerned with convention, style, spelling, or writing rules. The act of writing clarifies and refines the thinking process, and by the end, the writer has a better grasp on the process.

Repeat the free writing exercise at various stages of your writing process.

Where the heck am I going to apply to college? I have zero idea, how can I possibly know now as a teenager? College, stress, school, grades, maybe a Gap year? I don't want an all-girls school even though my grandmother wants me to go to Mt. Holyoke because she did. I want a party school! YES, frat parties and football games and the stuff I have heard that sound so fun! I love parties. Parties, parties, parties. Big schools have that. School, college far away would be scary but maybe that is what I need? Nah. I want to be near family Here is my partial list: UConn, Wheaton, Roger Williams (beach), U of Miami (warm), Brown (dream school can't get in) and U of Wisconsin where the state makes a lot of cheese and it requires a flight to get there -- that's a drag. I do really well in interviews. I'm really hungry and wonder if I have hit the five minute free-writing mark. How about Maine? Cold but beautiful and I want to be a marine biologist (I do? Where did that come from?) and my friend's brother is taking it at Colby.....

2) Reporter's questioning

Asking the six questions that journalists use everyday is a powerful way to direct and organize your writing.

This exercise works with all writing projects, from personal narrative writing to research projects or literary analysis.

Questioning is effective because it focuses attention on what needs further research. The level of questioning can be basic or sophisticated, and the facts generated often end up as textual evidence in body paragraphs of the finished paper.

- **Who?** Who is involved? Who is affected? Who is the central character?
- **What?** What is the topic? What is its significance? What is the basic problem? What are the issues?
- **Where?** Where does the activity take place? Where is information missing?
- **When?** When did the issue or problem develop? When is the deadline or end point?
- **Why?** Why did the issue or problem arise? Why is it an issue or problem?
- **How?** How can this be fixed? How does it affect those involved? How can it be resolved?

Example:

How much does the U of Connecticut cost? Where is Wheaton College and do they require SATs or ACT scores? When can I apply and what is the deadline? Do I know anyone who goes to either school? What types of programs exist? Who do I know who can help me figure this out?Where can I go for the answers to my questions?

3) Mind mapping

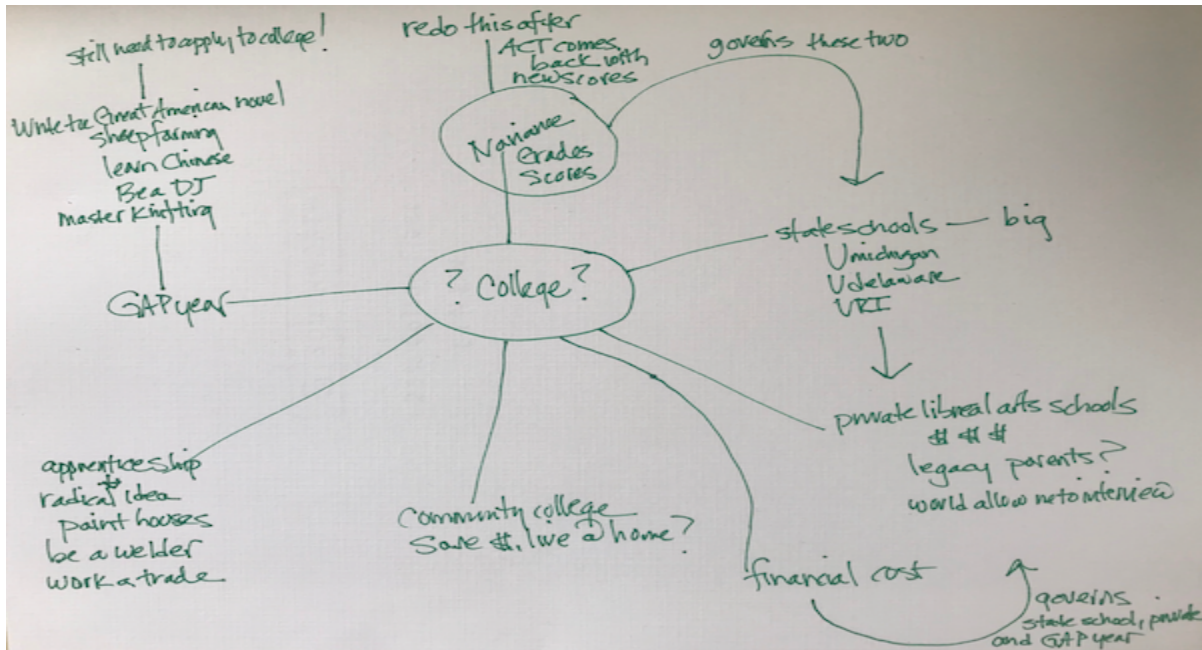
Mind mapping is an effective prewriting exercise because it provides a visual picture of your ideas and how those ideas relate to one another. The result will look like a web on your page.

This prewriting strategy works very well for visual learners.

This exercise also determines where most of your ideas are clustered, giving you an indication of your level of interest, often sending you in new directions and areas of original thought.

To begin, put the subject, topic or prompt in the center of a page, and circle it. As you think of other ideas, link the new ideas to the central circle with lines.

Review the image below, and revise with a new web as often as you like.



4) Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a process of quickly and freely generating a lot of information using lists and phrases. It can be done individually, with a partner, or in a group.

Like freewriting, it requires openly expressing thought without self-judging, evaluating, analyzing or rejecting any ideas. Simply get everything down on paper!

After you complete your list, find a partner and explain your list. Ask your partner's feedback to inspire more items on your list, adding until you think your list is complete. This is brainstorming at its best.

Brainstorming alternates between loose thinking/writing, and then tightened thinking/writing.

After you have completed your initial list, either individually or with a partner, put on your editor's cap. This is the time to organize, reduce, reorder, categorize, analyze and evaluate the list.

Cross off items and reorganize the list, grouping like items together. Put the most important at the top. Your condensed list often becomes an organized outline for your writing project.

Brainstorming example:

College, costs, distance, flights from near home, state schools, small liberal arts private schools, community colleges near home. Grades, test schools, Naviance. What kinds of students are at each. My list. Early decision?? Do any schools allow pets on campus? Do I have to take a gym class? I love science and where are the best science schools? Scared, worried, want that one place badly.

The above brainstormed list, condensed after editing:

- Grades and costs will influence where I apply.
- Choose an ED if my ACT comes back high.
- Apply everywhere, then wait and see, and finally, reevaluate.
- Don't get invested emotionally until accepted!

Try all four of the prewriting strategies, and get to know which works best for you.
Happy writing!