

Handout: Pre-Writing Techniques

Many people believe that good writing comes from some situations like those described in the following brief dramatic scene:

Setting: A dark study, lit only by the flame of a flickering candle. Young Will Shak-sper sits, quill in hand, staring blankly into space.

Will: (*Thinking out loud*) Why can't I think of anything to write?
Humanity is such a huge topic. Hmm...where shall I dine tonight? I wonder if that shrewish Kate is mad at me, she's so...wait, aha! I have it.
(*dips his quill and writes*)
Two households, both alike in dignity
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene....

Believing in stories like the one above is the first sure step to “writer’s block,” which is simply another way of saying “thinking too hard.” In fact, very few (if any) writers actually write like this (Shakespeare included). Writing begins with the process of compiling information, evidence, and sketchy ideas.

The next step in the writing process is to take that information and begin to form it into connections, arguments, and more polished prose that will lead you into the drafting process. We might call this the “invention stage.” No two writers do this the same way, so here is a list of various strategies for getting your ideas down on paper:

Directed Free Writing

To free write is to let your mind go and write spontaneously, often for a set amount of time. The process of “just writing” in a stream of consciousness can often free up thoughts and ideas about which we aren’t even fully conscious, or that we haven’t articulated to ourselves. In directed free writing, you focus on a topic, and let what you think and know about the topic flow out in a focused stream of ideas. As a first step in the invention stage, you might sit down with a paper assignment and write continuously for fifteen minutes.

Your words may not come quickly at first, but stick with it and force yourself to try to write for those fifteen minutes, you might be surprised with what comes out—you might generate questions whose answers help lead you to an argument or new set of ideas. Even if you only come up with one solid idea in those fifteen minutes, you have succeeded in “freeing up” your thinking, which (as the name might suggest!) is the point of free writing. As a second step, you might take that idea and write more about it, or shift to another strategy to continue the invention process (or, perhaps start drafting your essay, depending on how well developed this idea is).

Listing

Some writers find it helpful to make lists of their ideas, breaking significant ideas into sublists and seeing where they lead. This strategy can be approached as a form of free

writing if you try to let your mind go and jot down words and phrases that are related. You can create lists by pulling related ideas out of your notes or your readings. A caution: The linear nature of lists can sometimes lead you to planning the structure of your paper prematurely. Try to use lists as a way of brainstorming, then you can make another list to help with structure.

Outlining

Outlines are more structured versions of lists, grouping ideas in a hierarchical order (I., A., 1., a., etc.) with main points broken into subordinate points, and sometimes indicating evidence in support of these points. You might use outlines as a first stage in generating ideas during your invention process, or you can use outlines as a second step in invention: after free writing and/or listing, you might refine and build on your ideas by putting them in an outline for a workable structure in which to discuss the ideas you've brainstormed.

Clustering and Branching

These two methods of invention are more visual, nonlinear versions of listing and outlining. With both clustering and branching, you can start with an assignment's main topic (or with an idea generated in free writing) and you brainstorm related ideas that flow from that main idea. Clustering involves writing an idea in the middle of a page and circling it. Then draw lines leading from that circle or "bubble" to new bubbles where you write different subtopics of that central idea. Picking the subtopics that interest you most, draw lines leading to more bubbles wherein you note important aspects of the subtopics.

Branching follows the same principle, but instead of placing ideas in bubbles, write them on lines that branch off into other lines, containing the related subtopics of your larger topic.

This technique can be helpful because it allows you to freely explore ideas and can give you visual evidence of your interests and knowledge: the more branches or bubbles you have along one line of ideas, the more competence or interest you likely have in that idea.

Drafting

Drafting is the next step in the process of writing, but it can also be effective in invention. If you have a good idea of what you want to write about, sit down and begin to draft. You might end up deleting all of what you write at first, saving only one sentence. But this still allows you to get your ideas down on paper and can lead you to further investigation.

Remember, nothing comes from nothing, writing is not simply what one does the night before turning in an essay. You should write at every stage of the process!