

PREWRITING: GETTING STARTED

If you have difficulty starting a writing assignment or coming up with “enough” material to write about, consider trying one or more of the following techniques.

■ Brainstorming

- Set a time limit of 5 to 15 minutes.
- Write the topic at the top of a blank page and begin writing your ideas on the topic as fast as you can. List words, phrases, and partial questions. Don't try to write out complete sentences; just get down the essence of one idea and move on to the next.
- As you write, let one word or phrase suggest another. Follow word associations as far as they lead you into related ideas. Never fail to write down an idea because it doesn't seem relevant or “good enough.”
- Stop at the end of the time period and review your notes. Complete fragmentary ideas. While considering your purpose in writing and your intended audience, add more writing ideas and organize the list according to some system.

■ Clustering

- In a word or phrase, write your topic in the center of your paper and circle it.
- Also in a word or phrase, write down the main parts of your topic, circle them, and connect each part to the center.
- As you think of facts, details, related ideas, or examples, write these fragments down in a cluster around the main parts.

■ Freewriting

- Set a time limit of 10 to 20 minutes.
- Write the topic at the top of a blank page and begin writing as fast as possible. Try to write in a flow of sentences, as you might in talking to a friend or thinking out loud. Don't worry about punctuation or spelling or even connecting ideas -- just get the words on the paper as quickly as possible. If you get stuck, don't stop; instead, copy over the previous sentence until a new idea comes.
- When your time is up, review your writing, marking passages that seem to relate to a common theme. State this “common theme” in the form of a single sentence; this is the focus of your freewriting.
- Using the focus sentence, repeat the freewriting process for another 10 to 20 minutes to discover further ideas about your topic. Then focus again.
- While considering your purpose in writing and your intended audience, number your focus statements in some logical order.

■ Informal Outlining

- By starting to organize the information for an essay, you can discover new ways of dividing your topic and you can estimate whether you have enough information to develop each major point.
- Each major point must be supported with a similar degree of detail. If you divide your topic into two major parts (I and II), you should provide supporting reasons (A, B, C, etc.) for each major part, and details or examples (1, 2, 3, etc.) for each supporting reason.
- Don't feel, however, that you have to stick to a rigid numbering system. A combination of indentations and dashes can work just as well as numbers and letters!