

INSTRUCTOR: "Prewriting."

When you prewrite, you explore different aspects of your topic, evaluate your ideas, and bring your thoughts into focus. As this diagram shows, you can work through the prewriting steps in any order. And you will most likely move back and forth as you expand, zoom in on, and review your ideas.

Prewriting doesn't always involve writing. In the very early stages of an assignment, you may want to explore your topic by reading, surfing the web, and talking with friends or a writing center tutor. All of these activities can help you brainstorm ideas for your writing.

When you are ready to get some ideas down on paper, freewriting, listing, cluster mapping, asking questions, cubing, and outlining are all effective strategies for exploring and focusing your topic.

Writers who freewrite jot down as much as possible without stopping to make corrections. In a list, writers don't aim for complete sentences, and instead write down just key words and phrases. In a cluster map, writers draw the relationships between ideas.

These prewriting strategies are very open-ended and can help a writer explore possible ideas. Other prewriting strategies are more structured and can help writers focus their thoughts.

Answering well-known questions, called heuristics, helps writers develop vague ideas into more specific ones. In cubing, a writer explores the same topic six different ways to help narrow it down. In an outline, a writer has the overall shape of the paper in mind while coming up with relevant details.

That you spend time reflecting on your ideas is more important than which strategy you use. Being familiar with many strategies gives you flexibility whenever you experience writer's block.

Prewriting doesn't usually lead directly to a first draft, but it almost always helps writers sharpen their focus. In order to make the most of your prewriting, spend some time evaluating your notes and look for the big ideas that need more development.

Here is a cluster map that one student created. In evaluating her cluster map, this writer decided that the big ideas she would focus on were the positive and negative impacts of competitive sports for girls.

Once she had settled on these ideas, the writer could further explore certain aspects of them. For example, she could do some preliminary research on the physiological, psychological, and sociological demands of competitive athletics, considering both the pros and cons.

After prewriting more around these topics, the writer can evaluate again to decide which ideas can be combined, deleted, or explored further.

Remember, prewriting involved exploring, focusing, and evaluating ideas. It helps you generate ideas, stay on track, and pick wisely.