

Writing Tip Sheet: The Writing Process -- Prewriting

How many times have you waited till the night before a paper was due before getting started on it? How often, upon beginning to write, have you realized you either had nothing to say, weren't sure how to say it, or just really hated your topic?

Prewriting, the initial stage of the writing process, can spare you some of this pain.

As a designer you've more than likely experienced a period where you've generated ideas for a project before you've committed to a design. You've sketched, and sketched, and sketched -- adding a room, subtracting a door, changing the texture of the façade eight times, letting your imagination go on flights of fancy while you wonder what you want to do with the project. This stage of the design process is comparable to prewriting.

Prewriting is everything you do before you actually type up a draft of your paper. It gives you a chance to connect with your topic. There are no rules, tangents are encouraged, and grammar doesn't matter because the purpose of prewriting is to find out what is interesting and viable to you as a writer. There is no need to think about the audience because the only audience is you.

And if you happen to be someone who suffers from an occasional bout of writer's block, prewriting exercises can overcome this problem. (See below under Free Writing.)

While there are a variety of prewriting exercises, three principal (and invaluable) ones are Free Writing, Brainstorming, and Clustering.

Free Writing

Free writing is a useful tool to get in touch with your interest in a specific topic. The exercise asks you to:

- Set a time limit (5, 10, 15 or 20 minutes).
- Write nonstop in your allotted time.
- Write whatever comes to your mind. Do not correct, judge, or censor anything you write.
- Try not to even lift the pen from the paper. Keep it there and keep the ink flowing.

After your free write, read over your text; circle words, phrases or sentences that interest you. To narrow your focus, you may want to free write again with one of your new keywords.

Example: A free write on the Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal is purported to be a monument to love. It's the burial site for Mumataz Mahal and Shah Jahan. Marble. When I was a child I used to play marbles on the playground. A four part garden surrounds the Taj Mahal. I don't know what else to write. Why. Oh Why. Oh Why. Hmmm. The Taj Mahal is sdfsdfsfa a symbol of power. Power is awful. It's a symbol of money. It's has a garlic cloved dome. It's in India. There's water. What I wouldn't do for a drink right now. Reflections. Where is that going to lead? I don't know. What else? Yawn. There are minarets. Calligraphy and Filigree and Flowers. No representation of the human body. My fingers are soar from typing.

At first glance, this may not seem useful. After all, the writing is terrible and what do marbles and comments about your fingers have to do with the Taj Mahal? The answer is pretty simple – a flow of text like this means you have turned off your internal censor.

The internal censor is the vicious beast we all have inside our heads that constantly tells us: “You're wrong!” or “That's dumb” or “Start over.”

To write a paper, you need to turn that voice off. Pre-writing can allow you to do that. When you prewrite, you give yourself permission to be bad, to be awful, to be the worst writer in history. Allow ideas that would otherwise get smothered by your censor to have life. The important thing is to *get the idea out of your head*. When it is just an abstract thought, it is easy to label it “terrible” and eliminate it. But when you put it on paper, you might find it is surprisingly good.

Consider the above free write. There are some interesting tangents in the paragraph. What if it turns out your reference to marbles shakes loose another connection, which shakes loose another connection, and another, and another. And the next thing you know you have written a terrific (and original) essay about how the Taj Mahal is a wonderful metaphor for a game of marbles. (Hey, you never know!)

You're never going to do really original thinking if you let the censor win.

A variant of this exercise is to do multiple free writes over a longer period of time. Do them in different moods, in different places, some by hand and some on the computer. Do not read any of your free writes until you've completed all of them. Once finished, read over and circle your text for interesting words, phrases, and topics.

What many people find is that the hardest part of a paper is just getting started. Free writing gets you over that hump. Sometimes what starts out as a free write is, two or three hours later, a complete draft of a paper.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming relies on association and helps you to recognize what you know about your topic. Brainstorming helps you find key words and ideas for your essay.

- At the top of a sheet of paper, write down your topic.
- As fast as you can, list words and/or phrases that relate to your topic.
- Don't worry if the words appear to be random. Don't judge what comes to your mind. Just write it down. (Who cares if you're brain storming about Frank Lloyd Wright and you write down "Feed the dog"? It doesn't matter -- just keep going.)
- When you have filled the page, stop and look it over.
- Circle the 3 or 5 or 10 ideas that most appeal to you.

The ideas you circle may suggest a logical structure to the paper right away. Or you could do a free write based on these ideas and before you know it, you have a draft of an essay.

Clustering

Clustering is similar to brainstorming, but takes it one step further. Clustering creates connections and associations for the key words you write down, not just the topic. Think of clustering as brainstorming within a brainstorm.

- In the middle of a blank piece of paper, write down and circle your topic.
- As fast as you possibly can, write words and/or phrases that relate to your topic.
- Circle your new words and literally connect the words to your topic with a line.
- Don't worry if words appear to be random. Don't judge what comes to your mind. Just write it down. Brainstorm off of **any** word on the page. Just be sure to draw in the connecting lines.
- Once you have filled the page, examine the connections you have made. Follow your thought processes. Any given line of connected thoughts may suggest a paper and even a structure.
- If necessary, repeat this exercise using one of the words or connected lines you have written down.

The one thing to keep in mind as you free write is: you can't do it wrong. Whatever goes down on paper is fine. Your objective is simple – you want to find out what the heck is going on inside your head.