Pre-Writing Activities

Many students say that the hardest thing about writing is getting started. They look at a blank piece of paper or a blank computer screen and cannot think of a thing to say. Pre-writing activities are a great way to come up with ideas to write about. They can help you dig deeper into the topics, think about an idea in a new way, and organize your thoughts so that you can create a well-written paragraph.

There are many different pre-writing activities you can use, and no one method is better than another. Use whichever method you prefer. Try each one out until you find a method that works well for you.

Here we will discuss just two prewriting strategies you can use: freewriting and idea wheels.

A. Freewriting is a method in which you write out everything you know about the topic, even things that might seem unimportant. The key to freewriting is to write without stopping. Keep writing even when you think you are stuck and don’t have anything else to say about the topic. It is okay to let your mind wander to ideas that are only somewhat related to the topic. This can help lead you to ideas you had forgotten, or help you to see the relationships between ideas.

When practicing the freewriting technique, first write down all of the facts you know about the topic. Then ask, how do I feel about this topic? Where have I heard about it before? What would my friends and relatives think about this topic? It is helpful to create a list of questions you have about the topic. The answers to these questions may provide more material you can use in your paragraph.

Practice I: Freewriting

Write without stopping for five minutes on one of the following topics:

1. Dogs make great pets.
2. Children should be given chores to do.
3. Explain which holiday is your favorite.

When you are done, look at what you have written. Did you write more or less than you expected? Was it hard writing for five full minutes? Do you have enough information to turn into a full paragraph?
B. An **Idea Wheel**, sometimes called *clustering*, is another pre-writing strategy. It is like freewriting, except that instead of writing out a list of ideas, you draw them into a wheel to help you see the connections between the ideas. Imagine the topic is at the center of the wheel. In a circle around it are blank bubbles to write ideas in. Each bubble has a line connecting it to the topic, making the diagram look like a wheel with spokes.

For example, if the topic is “elephants,” the wheel would start with the topic in the center:

![Elephants](image1)

Then, spokes are added to connect the center with surrounding bubbles for new ideas:

![Elephants](image2)
The next step is to fill in the smaller bubbles with things you know about elephants. For example, you could write that they are mammals, are very large, live in herds, and are vegetarians. Other bubbles might contain information about where they live or how humans interact with them.

You can see how some of these ideas overlap. The bubbles about where they live in the wild and where they live in captivity are closely related. You could draw a line between those two bubbles to show the connection of those two ideas. You can also see that there is way more information here than you could use in a single paragraph! There is enough here for several paragraphs or even a short essay. If you only have to write one paragraph, then you could pick just one bubble and focus on that. Instead of elephants in general, your main idea sentence could be “Humans encounter elephants in captivity.” Each of the items in that bubble can now become a major or minor supporting sentence.

**Practice II: Idea Wheel**

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*Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/courses/engl000 Subunit 1.4.1

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On a separate piece of paper, construct an idea wheel for one of the two topics you did not use for Practice I. Spend between 5 and 10 minutes on your wheel, making sure that the topic is the center. When you are done, look back at what you wrote. Did you write more or less than you expected? Was it difficult to work for the full five minutes? Do you have enough information to edit that into a paragraph?

**Practice III: Moving from Pre-Writing to Writing**

Now we are going to take a completed pre-writing exercise and turn it into a paragraph. You are going to fill in the chart below to help you construct your paragraph, which should include a main idea and major and minor details. You may use either of the two pre-writing exercises that you have already completed. You do not need to write out full sentences in the chart, but be sure to include enough information so that it is clear how you are going to develop the chart into a paragraph. Once the chart is filled out, create a paragraph by rewriting each piece of information as a complete sentence. This will give you a finished paragraph of five to seven sentences.

**NOTE:** Do not just write “I will give an example.” You need to provide a few words about what that example will be.

Unacceptable: “I will give an example of why spanking is bad"

Acceptable: “young children don’t know why they are being spanked"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Idea:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support #1 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support #2 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support #3 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support #4 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support #5 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Support #6 (indicate if this is major or minor detail):