

# Prewriting

Anything you do before you start writing is *prewriting*. You should always start by making sure you understand the assignment. Other activities that are frequently completed in this stage are re- searching, brainstorming, choosing a focus, and outlining.

## Understand the assignment

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Make sure that you understand the requirements of the task. If there is a specific prompt you are supposed to use, make sure your writing addresses the prompt.

## Research

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Doing research can be the hardest part about academic writing. Up until this point, a majority of the writing you have done shows what you *know or think* about a topic. Researched academic essays are more about what you *learn*. You should not choose topics you know a lot about for researched essays. Instead, choose topics you want to learn about.

You will find the other steps of the prewriting phase to be very difficult if you have not done some basic preliminary research, but you will also probably need to do research all along the way.

After you know about your assignment (e.g., write a classification essay), you may start searching online to find a topic (e.g., types of

clouds). With the topic in mind, you will need to do more research (unless you are an expert on your topic) to know what to focus on (e.g., cirrus clouds, cumulonimbus clouds, stratus clouds, etc.). After you have your focus, you may need to do more research to create a good outline.

Keep track of the sources you use when you are researching. Save links to the websites you find or print sources. Saving information about these sources makes it easier to find quotes for your essay later.

You should not try to write the entire essay from your own experience and knowledge and then try to find research that agrees with your points. Research should be the starting point.

## **Exercise 1: Researching a Prompt**

For this practice, we will use a prompt from the "Addressing the Prompt" chapter of this textbook. However, you could practice this same step with a different prompt topic using the same steps.

Prompt: Describe an important place in your home country.

1. Visit the Wikipedia page, location website, or city tourist information website to get a clear idea of what can be included in the content.
2. Use a search engine to look for recent news articles about your city.
3. Use the BYU Library search or Google Scholar and search for the name of the place you chose (You may not find anything useful here for this topic, but it's always worth a try!)

## **Brainstorm**

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Sometimes you are given a specific prompt (e.g., Research and

describe a famous author), but sometimes you can choose your topic. If you can choose your topic, then brainstorming can help you generate ideas to write about.

There are many methods you can use for brainstorming.

- Discuss the topic with a partner - This is a good way to get your brain engaged. You may want to try recording the conversation so you can type up your ideas after.
- Do a free write - Open a new document or find a fresh piece of paper. Then just start writing what you are thinking. It doesn't matter at this point how related it is to the topic! You can then look through and underline what is useful or delete anything that is not.
- Make a list of ideas - Start making a list of every word or phrase that comes to your mind when you read the prompt. Do not worry about writing something that is not relevant. You can go through after and mark what you like best.
- Make an idea map (also known as an idea web) - An idea map starts with a word or phrase at the center. Draw lines out from that phrase to connect to related words and phrases. This will end with an image similar to a spider web that gives you an idea of connections and relationships you see between your ideas.
- Do a search on Google - Often one of the early steps in brainstorming is to do an internet search to see what other people have to say about the topic.

## Exercise 2: Brainstorming for a Prompt

For this practice, we will use a prompt from the "Addressing the Prompt" chapter of this textbook. However, you could practice this same step with a different prompt topic using the same steps.

Prompt: Describe an important place in your home country.

1. Set a timer for 3 minutes. Make a list of everything you think about connected to the topic in that time.
2. Revisit one of the websites you looked at in the previous exercise. Add notes to your paper of anything interesting that stands out to you from that page.
3. Describe is a big verb. Add ideas to your list of *how* you can describe the place and *how* a place can be important. What would someone be interested to learn? What is most unique to you about your place?
4. Set a timer for 10 minutes. Think about the prompt and draw. You don't need to be a confident artist, just draw.
5. Choose 5 of your items on your list. Draw 5 lines coming from each of those 5 items. Next to each line, write details, questions, or related ideas.
6. Set a timer for 3 minutes. Talk to a partner about your initial ideas. Then listen to your partner share his or her ideas. Write down any new thoughts you have during this discussion.

## Choose your focus

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If your topic is really broad, you should narrow the topic down to have a more specific focus.

For example, if you choose to write about the benefits of learning another language, you will probably need to narrow down that topic to a few benefits of exercise (e.g., social, professional, and mental

benefits of learning another language). Researching online or repeating a brainstorming activity may help you choose your focus.

### Exercise 3: Focusing on the Prompt

For this practice, we will use a prompt from the "Addressing the Prompt" chapter of this textbook. However, you could practice this same step with a different prompt topic using the same steps.

Prompt: Describe an important place in your home country.

1. Take a highlighter or a pen and circle all of the ideas that feel interesting and broad enough to write an essay about.
2. Choose two or three aspects of your city that you will focus your paper on.
3. Think about how the list items you circled best connect to those two or three points.

### Tip: Choosing a Focus

It's often best to choose a topic you are most excited about. Drafted essays are typically long-term projects, which means you want to avoid getting tired of your topic over the weeks of working on it. Even a timed writing assignment will be easier to write if you start by choosing something you are invested in.

Being invested in a topic looks different for everyone. Here are some examples of what it might look like for different students writing about an important place in their home country:

- I really love history. I'm very proud of the people who made my country what it is today. We have so many interesting stories that my classmates don't know about. I think this place really shows the interesting history of my country. I've never written

about my country's history formally and definitely not in English. It would help me stay motivated to write about these stories because I want more people to know the events and people connected to this place.

- I enjoy the unique landscape of my country. I want to write about the volcano near my home because this is a popular vacation spot for people in my country, but I have noticed that none of my American friends can find it on a map. I want to convince people to visit this beautiful place.
- My country has many famous artists. I am always so excited to talk to people who love art because they know all these famous artists. This essay does not feel exciting to me, but I love to talk about art. Maybe focusing on the art museum will help me feel excited to write because I am so proud of this talent from my country.
- Unfortunately, many people connect my city to negative things. It is not a perfect place, but I am always so disappointed by the negative reaction I get when I say where I'm from. I want to focus my essay on a religious pilgrimage site so that people understand that there is more to my home than the negative things they hear in the news.

## Outline

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Making an outline is a prewriting activity you should do for everything you write. An outline is a plan that will ensure your essay is easier to write and understand.

Not all outlines are the same. The amount of detail required in the outline depends on the purpose of the essay and the expectations of your instructor. If you are writing a timed essay without research, your outline will be very simple. If you are writing a researched essay, your outline will probably be more detailed and may include some of your sources.

When you write an outline for a class, your teacher may ask you for a very detailed outline of your essay so that you can show your whole plan. When you need to make an outline, be sure to ask how much detail your teacher expects you to use in your outline.

At a minimum, every outline will at least state your thesis and topic sentences. To create your outline, think about the question that your essay answers (e.g., what is essential for a friendship?). Answer the question (e.g., trust and communication). The supporting points in your answer will become your topic sentences (abbreviated TS). Write the main idea of your essay, your thesis (abbreviated TH), by summarizing your supporting points into one sentence.

Look at the example outline below. This basic outline is the type of outline you could create when you are writing an essay without research that is based on what you know (the type of essay you write on the TOEFL). Notice how directly the topic sentences support the thesis.

## **Example: Basic Outline**

### 1. Introduction

- I. TH: Communication and trust are essential parts of every friendship.

### 2. Body Paragraph 1

- I. TS: Friendships have clear, positive, and frequent communication.

### 3. Body Paragraph 2

- I. TS: Trust is foundational in our friendships.

### 4. Conclusion

- I. TH: Friendships require both communication and trust.

You can finish one of these basic outlines very quickly. In fact, for timed essays, you need to be able to write an outline like this in about two or three minutes.

## Exercise 4: Complete outlines

*The following outlines are incomplete. After you read the prompt, take 1-2 minutes to brainstorm, then finish the outlines.*

1. Prompt: Why do cities contract public art?

- TH: Cities contract public art because it inspires unity in the community and draws visitors to the city.
- TS:
- TS:
- TH: In order to encourage visitors and more unity, many cities install public art into parks and other public spaces.

2. Prompt: Which is more important: talent or skill?

- TH:
- TS:
- TS:
- TH:

On the other hand, planning a researched essay will take more time. A simple method for planning a researched essay starts with a basic outline. Then add questions to the outline for each topic sentence. Then find quotations in sources that answer each of your questions.

One of the reasons that this method is helpful is because it gives you direction in your research. You can research more quickly because instead of reading everything you can find out about your topic, you are reading to find the answers to a few questions.

## **Write a basic outline after you have done some preliminary research.**

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Start by simply writing out your thesis and topic sentences. You can add any additional points that you came up with during the brainstorm stage as well. Be sure to check the rubric for your assignment to know how much detail your teacher expects to see in the outline.

### **Example Minimal Outline**

TH: Learning to play an instrument is a valuable skill for everyone to learn.

TS: Playing an instrument has several benefits for our brains.

TS: There are also emotional benefits we receive from learning to play an instrument.

## **Ask questions about each of your topic statements.**

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Asking yourself questions is a helpful step. Look at your topic sentences and ask yourself what a reader without any knowledge about this topic would want to know. What type of information would be new, exciting, or convincing for your reader? What questions do you have? You aren't expected to be an expert about the topic, so thinking about what you would *want* to know will help you direct your content.

## **Example Outline with Questions**

TS: Playing an instrument has several benefits for our brains.

Q1: Does it help you learn other things (ex. languages/math)?

Q2: What impact does learning to play an instrument have on our memory?

Q3: Are the benefits the same when you play as a child vs as an adult?

TS: There are also emotional benefits we receive from learning to play an instrument.

Q1: What benefits are there for mental health?

Q2: How does music change your emotions?

Q3: Why do I feel calm when I play the piano?

## **Example Outline with Questions (Additional)**

TS: A restaurant is one of the most risky businesses to start for entrepreneurs.

- What makes a restaurant more risky than other types of businesses?
- Is a restaurant equally risky for a franchise to establish?
- How many restaurants started by entrepreneurs fail? Why?
- How many restaurants started by entrepreneurs succeed? Why?

## **Find sources that answer your questions. Copy the quotes and put them in the outline.**

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Use key words from your questions to search for information online through the BYU Library or Google Scholar. You don't want to type the whole question. Instead, you could use something like: "benefits" and "mental health" and "play instrument" to get a list of articles that might answer your question.

## Example Outline with Questions & Sources

TS: Playing an instrument has several benefits for our brains.

Q2: Are the benefits the same when you play as a child vs as an adult?

"Thus, musicians appear to be less susceptible to age-related degenerations in the brain, presumably as a result of their daily musical activities" (Wan & Schlaug, 2010, p. 572)

TS: There are also emotional benefits we receive from learning to play an instrument.

Q3: What benefits are there for mental health?

"The results of the study indicate that there are specific benefits associated with piano instruction, especially the development of self-esteem. The increase in self-esteem of the children who completed three years of piano instruction was significant while the changes in self-esteem of those who never participated in piano instruction or who dropped out of the lessons were not." (Costa-Giomi, 2004, p. 148)

Sometimes your questions may be difficult to find answers for. Asking questions is a good strategy to focus your research, but don't hesitate to ask additional questions (or adjust your original questions) if you

can't find sources to answer all of them. It may be that there are no sources to answer some of your questions, and that is okay. Let the research guide you.

Oftentimes as you research and become more familiar with your subject, you will ask better questions based off of things you read. It's also okay to adjust your outline based on the research that you conduct.

All of these questions support and develop the topic sentence. However, if after doing research you can't find a source to answer one of these questions, don't be afraid to throw out or adjust a good question.

## Exercise 5: Write Questions

For each topic sentence, write questions that could help guide the researcher.

Example:

TS: Business etiquette differs greatly between the United States and many Asian countries.

- What is typical business etiquette in the US?
- What is typical business etiquette in Asian countries?
- What characteristics of business etiquette are the most unique to each place?

Practice

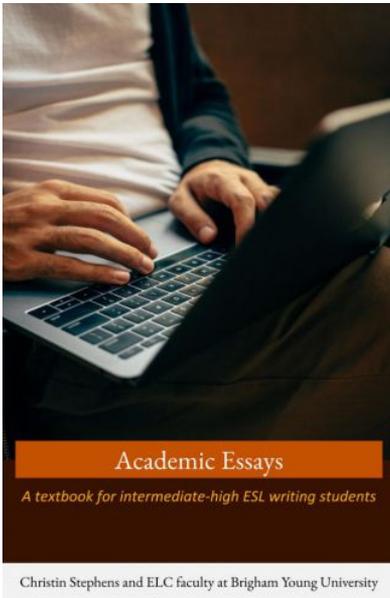
1. TS: Rome and Greece were influential societies because of their architecture.
2. TS: Governments need to regulate burning fossil fuels because the health effects of air pollution on humans are severe.
3. TS: The Great Depression was a time of economic uncertainty that led to innovation.

## References

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Costa-Giomi, E. (2004). Effects of three years of piano instruction on children's academic achievement, school performance and self-esteem. *Psychology of Music*, 32(2), 139-152.  
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