

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

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

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

It is very difficult to prewrite if you have not done some basic preliminary research. You will probably need to do research during the process of writing your research essay as well.

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.

Brainstorm

Sometimes you are given a specific prompt (e.g., Research and describe a famous psychologist), but sometimes you can choose your topic. If you are able to choose your own topic, brainstorming can help you generate ideas to write about. There are many methods you can use for brainstorming. You can discuss the topic with a partner, do a free write, make a list of ideas, make an idea map, do a search on Google, etc.

Choose your focus

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 exercise, you will probably need to narrow down that topic to a few benefits of exercise

(e.g., physical and mental benefits of exercise). Researching online or repeating a brainstorming activity may help you choose your focus.

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 their home city:

- I really love history. I'm very proud of the people who made my city what it is today. We have so many interesting stories that my classmates don't know about. I know a lot about my city, but I've never written about it formally and definitely not in English. It would help me stay motivated to write about these stories because I want more people to know these events and people.
- I enjoy the unique landscape of my home city. I think it's incredible how much variety you can experience in my city: the beach, the mountains, and the forest. My home 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 my beautiful city.
- My city is home to an incredible soccer team. I am always so excited to talk to friends who love soccer because they know all about my city. This essay does not feel exciting to me, but I love to talk about soccer. Maybe including this detail will help me to want to work on the essay.
- Unfortunately, many people connect my city to negative things. It is not a perfect place, but I am always so disappointed that the reaction I get when I say where I'm from is about the bad things that have happened there. I want to explain in my essay that these perspectives are not accurate to my experience. I want people to know the real city.

Outline

Making an outline is a prewriting activity you should do for everything you write. An outline is a plan that will ensure your essay 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 as well as the purpose of your outline. 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 to have in every relationship?). 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

Introduction

TH: Communication and trust are essential parts of every relationship.

Body Paragraph 1

TS: Relationships must be built on communication.

Body Paragraph 2

TS: Trust is foundational in our relationships.

Conclusion

TH: Relationships 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.

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.

- TH: Learning a language as a child and learning language as an adult are very distinct processes.
- TS: Learning vocabulary in a second language is faster than learning vocabulary as a child.
- TS: Whether learning a language as a child or as an adult, the grammar is learned differently.

Ask questions about each of your topics.

- TS: Learning vocabulary in a second language is faster than learning vocabulary as a child.
 - Q1: How long does it take to learn vocabulary in a second language?
 - Q2: How long does it take to learn vocabulary as a child?
 - Q3: Why is it faster to learn as an adult?
- TS: Whether learning a language as a child or as an adult, the grammar is learned differently.
 - Q1: How do adults learn grammar?
 - Q2: How do children learn grammar?
 - Q3: What does that mean for grammar learning?

Find sources that answer your questions. Copy the quote and put it in the outline.

- TS: Learning vocabulary in a second language is faster than learning vocabulary as a child.
 - Q1: How long does it take to learn vocabulary in a second language?
 - (Couldn't find anything definitive to answer this question).
 - Q2: How long does it take to learn vocabulary as a child?
 - "During the second year of life, children start learning approximately one word per week, and then one word per day" (Gleason, 2017, p. 112).
 - "Children do not acquire a language more quickly than adults and with lots of time to devote to language acquisition, adults can learn a second language to a high level of proficiency in the same amount of time it takes a baby to learn its first 20 words" (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012, p. 15-16).
 - Q3: Why is it faster to learn as an adult?
 - "Adults bring life experience and a lot of experience with language to the classroom. They are able to learn explicitly, using rules... This is not to say that adults can't learn implicitly, but adult students may be in a hurry to learn, and rules (and strategy use) might facilitate learning for them." (Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012, p. 17)

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.

Exercises

Exercise 1.4: 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 your home city.

1. Visit the *Wikipedia page, city website, or 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 your city (You may not find anything useful here for this topic, but it's always worth a try!)

Exercise 1.5: 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 your home city.

1. Set a timer for a few minutes (le. 2-3 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 city. What would someone be interested to learn? What is most interesting to you about your city?
4. Think about the prompt and draw. You don't need to be a confident artist, just draw.
5. Choose 5 of the 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 a few minutes (le. 2-3 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.

Exercise 1.6: 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 your home city.

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.

Exercise 1.7: Outlining a Prompt Response

1. With a partner, choose one of the example focused topics from the tip box above.
2. Write an outline of what the author might include in this essay to describe Provo.
3. Switch your outline with another partner group.
4. Read through the outline.
5. Write a question for each topic sentence about what you would want to know about that aspect of Provo.

Sources:

Gleason, J. B., & Ratner, N. B. (2017). *The development of language*. Pearson.

Brown, S. & Larson-Hall, J. (2012) *Second language acquisition myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. The University of Michigan Press.



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