

Prewriting Strategies



The beginning phase of the writing process is called prewriting. This handout offers several prewriting strategies to help you generate, contextualize, organize, and focus ideas. You may need to try a variety of approaches before finding what will work best for you and your assignment.

Questioning

Asking questions can help you figure out what to write about, narrow your ideas, and discover interesting nuances within your topic. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What interests me? **Why?** Can I write about it?

Writing about what you are interested in will be much more exciting and motivating; the writing process is more rewarding when you feel what you are saying is significant. Approach potentially boring topics from new angles.

- Who is involved? What is happening? Where is it taking place? When has this happened? **Why?**

The more familiar you are with your topic, the easier it is to develop claims and ideas to write about.

- What do people argue about? **Why?**

Your writing is entering a conversation, whether in your community or a specific field of academic study. Looking at sources about hotly debated topics can help you develop your ideas and understand where to step into the conversation.

- What do I disagree with? **Why?** Can I defend my point?

Your opinions can provide writing material. It's often easier to recognize ideas you disagree with, so you can start there.

For example, if you wanted to write about World War II, you could begin by researching with the previous questions in mind. You might realize that you're especially interested in the development and use of aircraft in that war. Your next question could be, what developments were taking place? Keep asking questions about your topic and your findings, and always keep pen and paper nearby to write down your questions and answers.

Researching

As we said before, researching with questions in mind can enhance your findings. Additionally, productive approaches to research include finding out what people are saying or have said about your topic and learning about any key figures, events, or movements that play a part in your topic. You can find sources about your topic with the help of internet searches, library staff, and instructors. Researching can help you decide what information is important to focus on in your writing.

Discussing

Discussing your ideas with someone can help you figure out what you have to say about a topic. Consider bringing up your ideas, findings, or claims in casual conversations with your peers. If we revisit the World War II example, these points of conversation could be as simple as a pilot's story you find really intriguing or as complex as an opinion you have about ethics in combat. See what sorts of questions your peers ask and what counterarguments

they bring up, and incorporate those into your writing. You can also bring your ideas to your instructor, a TA, or a writing tutor and have the same sort of conversation about your argument. This exercise can help you relate to your audience and understand the scope of your paper by showing you what readers want to know.

Freewriting

Freewriting can help you get all the ideas you've been formulating out of your head and onto paper. To begin, give yourself a set amount of time and write whatever comes to your mind about your topic—creative introductions, anecdotes, related subjects, research, more specific ideas, anything and everything. Once your ideas are written out, you can look through them and decide what topic you want to focus on, figure out what you want to research more, and even incorporate some of your freewriting into your rough draft.

Diagramming

If you are a visual learner, it might be helpful to draw a diagram, since diagrams can help show the connections between your ideas and the structure of your argument. There are plenty of ways to map out your ideas; here are two effective methods:

Bubble diagram (See Figure 1). Draw a circle and write your topic in the center. Then draw other bubbles branching out of it. Write ideas in these bubbles that build off of the central thought. Keep branching off of your bubbles to make clusters of related ideas.

Outline (See Figure 2). Write your central idea or tentative thesis. Underneath this main heading, make a bulleted list of the supporting arguments for your thesis (they can be labeled A, B, C, etc.). For each of those arguments, list support (labeled 1, 2, 3, etc.). This exercise helps you consider the logical progression of your ideas, and your initial outline could even turn into the organization of your paper.

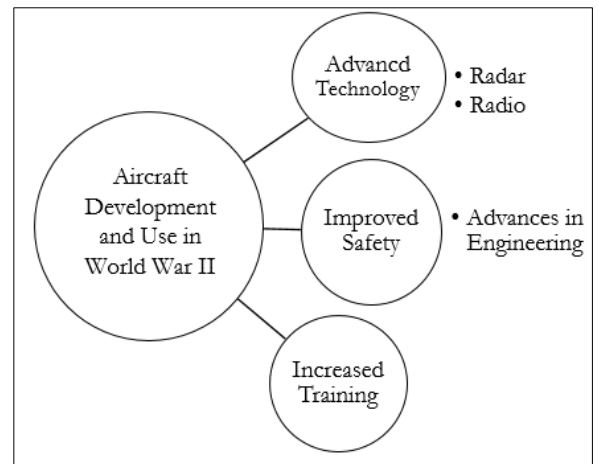


Figure 1: Bubble Diagram

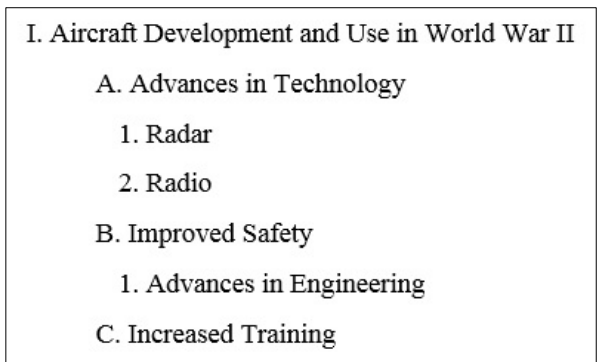


Figure 2: Outline

Taking a Break

If you have tried these prewriting techniques and are still not satisfied with your progress, give yourself some time away from your project. Giving yourself time and space away from your work can help you relax, gain perspective, and return to your writing with fresh eyes and new insights.