

## Effective Writing Center – Student Resources

### Pre-writing & Outlining

Prewriting exercises provide structure and meaning to your topic and research before you begin to write a draft. Using prewriting strategies to organize and generate ideas prevent a writer from becoming frustrated or “stuck.” Just as you would prepare to give a public speech on note cards, it is also necessary to write ideas down for a rough draft. After all, your audience is counting on a well-organized presentation of interesting facts, a storyline, or whatever you are required to write about. Prewriting exercises can help you focus your ideas, determine a topic, and develop a logical structure for your paper.

### Prewriting Exercises

- **Brainstorming:** It’s often helpful to set a time limit on this; plan to brainstorm for ten minutes, for example. This will help you focus and keep you from feeling overwhelmed. This is especially helpful when you’re still trying to narrow or focus your topic. You’ll start with a blank page, and you’ll write down as many ideas about your topic as you can think of. Ask yourself questions as you write: Why am I doing this? Why do I like this? Why don’t I like this? What is the most interesting thing about this field or issue? How would my audience feel about this? What can we learn from this? How can we benefit from knowing more? When time is up, read over your list, and add anything else that you think of. Are there patterns or ideas that keep coming up? These are often clues about what is most important about this topic or issue.
- **Freewriting:** A time limit is also useful in this exercise. Using a blank piece of paper or your word-processing program, summarize your topic in a sentence and keep writing. Write anything that comes to your mind and don’t stop. Don’t worry about grammar or spelling, and if you get stuck, just write whatever comes to mind. Continue until your time limit is up, and when it’s time to stop, read over what you’ve written and start underlining the most important or relevant ideas. This will help you to identify your most important ideas, and you’ll often be surprised by what you come up with.
- **Listing:** In this exercise, you’ll simply list all of your ideas. This will help you when you are mapping or outlining your ideas, because as you use an idea, you can cross it off your list.
- **Clustering:** This is another way to record your thoughts and observations for a paragraph or essay after you have chosen a topic. First draw a circle near the center of a blank piece of paper, and in that circle, write the subject of your essay or paragraph. Then in a ring around the main circle, write down the main parts or subtopics within the main topic. Circle each of these, and then draw a line connecting that connects them to the main circle in the middle. Then think of other ideas, facts, or issues that relate to each of the main parts/subtopics, circle these, and draw lines connecting them to the relevant part/subtopic. Repeat this process with each new circle until you run out of ideas. This is a great way of identifying the parts within your topic, which will provide content for the paper, and it also helps you discover how these parts relate to each other.

### Outlining your Paper

An outline is a plan for the paper that will help you organize and structure your ideas in a way that effectively communicates them to your reader and supports your thesis statement. You’ll want to work on an outline after you’ve completed some of the other exercises, since having an idea what you’ll say in the paper will make it much easier to write. An outline can be very **informal**; you might simply jot down your thesis statement, what the introduction will discuss, what you’ll say in the body of the paper, and what you want to include in the conclusion.

Remember that all writing—even academic writing—needs to tell a “story”: the introduction often describes what has already happened (the background or history of your topic), the body paragraphs might explain what is currently happening and what needs to happen (this often involves discussing a problem, the need for a solution, and possible solutions), and the conclusion usually looks to the future by focusing on what is likely to happen (what might happen next, and whether a solution is likely). If you work on telling a story in the paper, it will help you to structure it in a way that the reader can easily follow and understand.

Sometimes you may be required (or you may want) to develop a more **formal** outline with numbered and lettered headings and subheadings. This will help you to demonstrate the relationships between the ideas, facts, and information within the paper. Here’s an example of what this might look like:

- I. Introduction
  - a. Fact that grabs audience attention
  - b. Background/history of issue/problem/topic
  - c. Thesis statement)
- II. Current state of issue/problem/topic
  - a. Topic/claim sentence: make a claim that explains the paragraph is about
  - b. Evidence that supports/explains the claim (this is often research from secondary sources)
  - c. Analysis that explains how the evidence support your claim and why this matters to the paper’s thesis statement
- III. The need for a solution or course of action
  - a. Topic/claim
  - b. Evidence
  - c. Analysis
- IV. Possible Solution
  - a. Topic/claim
  - b. Evidence
  - c. Analysis
- V. Conclusion
  - a. What might happen now?
  - b. Is a solution likely?
  - c. What’s the future of the issue?

Your outline will contain more detailed information, and if there are certain areas that the assignment requires you to cover, then you can modify the outline to include these. You can also expand it if you’re writing a longer research paper: the discussion of the problem might need several paragraphs, for example, and you might discuss the pros and cons of several possible solutions.

## RESOURCES

### Osmania University – Prewriting, Outlining, and Drafts

[http://www.osmania.ac.in/e-Education/Study%20Guides/rough\\_drafts.htm](http://www.osmania.ac.in/e-Education/Study%20Guides/rough_drafts.htm)

### Purdue’s Online Writing Lab (OWL) – Developing an Outline

[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl\\_outlin.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_outlin.html)

### Roane State Community College Online Writing Lab – How to Begin to Write

<http://www.rsccl.edu/owll&writingcenter/OWL/HowtoBegin.html>

### University of Kansas Writing Center – Prewriting Strategies

<http://www.writing.ku.edu/students/docs/prewriting.shtml>