Writing as Process: Prewriting

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I’m guessing that if I asked most of you to describe “the writing process” for me, you would say something like this: “Writing involves brainstorming ideas, deciding on a thesis statement and outline, actually writing the essay, and editing.” And you’d be correct. Prewriting, drafting, and revision are the fundamental components of the writing process. However, I’d also venture to guess that if I asked you to describe your own writing process, several of you would respond that you prefer to just sit down and start writing to see where the paper takes you. Others of you might respond that you don’t really have a process; you just think about your ideas and start writing. With such responses, you’d be revealing that rather than truly viewing writing as a process, you’re viewing it as a one-time task that you need to complete as quickly and painlessly as possible. Many of you might also admit that you find writing frustrating or that you have trouble thoroughly developing your ideas and meeting page requirements. Unfortunately, many students try to skip to the actual drafting phase of the writing process rather than going through the intellectual and planning processes that can help us be more successful in writing. However, as you move on in your academic career and begin writing more complex papers, you will need to learn to approach writing as a process.

This term we’d like you to begin to develop your own prewriting, drafting, and revision processes. To help you do that, we’ve worked these processes into the structure of the course. For each paper you write, you will spend one week learning about and prewriting content for the essay and one week drafting and revising the essay. Hopefully through practicing these steps throughout the term, you’ll internalize writing as process and learn prewriting, drafting, and revision skills you can individualize for use in future writing situations.

Whether you’re writing an annotated bibliography as you did last week, a summary and response essay as you will in this unit and the next, or a more extensively researched essay like those in Composition II, prewriting is the foundation upon which an academic essay is built. Sure, in some cases you might be able to get by with quickly skimming your sources or throwing together information, but the quality of your insights and your ideas will depend upon the quality of your prewriting processes. Considering the significance of prewriting to your success in this course and others, let’s take a few minutes and explore the topic.

When we say “prewriting,” we mean the activities that prepare you to write your essay. On a very basic level, this involves developing a question for inquiry and preparing an answer to that question. For example, the question “How can involvement in high school sports improve academic performance?” could serve as a writing prompt for either a personal-based essay (which would rely on personal observations and experiences) or for an academic research essay (which would require thorough research and analysis). In either case, the goal of the prewriting process would be to develop or gather enough information that you could make a claim or argument in response to the question, develop reasons and examples to support your claim, and write an outline so you can write the first draft of your essay.
As I’m sure you can imagine, the pre-writing process for a personal based essay is much different than the pre-writing process for a researched essay. For instance, when writing a simple narrative or expository essay in response to a question for inquiry, prewriting will primarily involve idea generation and outlining. That is, you’ll need to use brainstorming strategies such as listing, free-writing, and idea mapping to spark ideas and memories in order develop essay material. Then, you would likely organize your thoughts, develop your thesis statement and main points, generate more examples to support your main points, and draft your essay. So, in response to our earlier question, you might brainstorm for an hour or so about your own life, your friends’ experiences, and your observations and decide that you would like to argue that high school sports improve academic performance by teaching self-discipline, teamwork, and respect for authority.

In writing a research-based essay, you may end up with the same answer to our question for inquiry. However, because your ideas would need to be supported with studies and expert testimony, you would need to spend a great deal of time gathering information from outside sources before you could begin organizing your ideas and deciding on a thesis statement. You would first need to find a number of academic sources and read widely to inform yourself about the topic. Only after spending time researching could you decide on a working thesis statement and a direction for your paper. Once you had your working thesis, you would need to read your sources carefully and take notes over those sources, and perhaps even look for more sources. After you’d gathered information from your sources, you could develop an outline and revise your thesis statement in preparation for writing your rough draft. Hopefully you can see that while the personal-based essay might have involved an hour of prewriting and planning, a source-based essay might involve weeks of researching and planning just in preparation for writing an outline. Of course, prewriting for academic papers will not always take weeks and does not always have to involve extensive research. For instance, the critical reading and annotation you did last week in preparation to write the annotated bibliography probably took you several hours, but certainly not several weeks.

Because essay assignments for various classes might be slightly different and because each of us develops our own preferences and specific writing processes, there are no hard and fast rules for prewriting. However, because essays responding to or incorporating sources require similar types of preparation, I can offer a few suggestions that might help you as you continue in the course:

1. First, begin by developing a question to guide your brainstorming or research. In the case of a summary and response essay, your question might be as simple as “Do I agree with this essay? Why or why not?” Whereas, for a true research essay your question might be broader.
2. Second, gather information in response to that question. This may involve simply reading and annotating the single source you are to respond to or it may involve extensive research and note-taking.
3. Third, develop a working thesis statement in response to your question. This will give you an initial focus as you continue gathering information.
4. Fourth, decide upon or look for reasons to support your working thesis. At times, these reasons might be based purely upon your own opinions and logic. However, when writing a research paper, they may be grounded in your sources’ ideas.
5. Fifth, look back through your notes and data for examples, quotes, and information to support each of your main points.

6. Finally, draft an outline in which you revise your thesis statement, finalize your main points, and plan your introduction and conclusion.

Although you might decide you want to rearrange these steps or combine some of them to make the process work better for you, you’ll likely need to use most of these strategies in preparing to write academic essays. It is important, though, that you make the process your own and figure out what works most effectively for you. Experimenting with your personal writing process during this term will help you learn how you write best. Just be sure your writing process factors in enough time for prewriting.

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