The Writing Center
Prewriting Strategies

The are many ways to get started with your writing assignment. The following five strategies can help you organize ideas as well as develop topics for your writing. We ordered these strategies on an increasing level of critical thinking.

1. Listing

Listing is a process of producing a lot of information within a short time by generating some broad ideas and then building on those associations for more detail with a bullet point list. Listing is particularly useful if your starting topic is very broad, and you need to narrow it down.

- Jot down all the possible terms that emerge from the general topic you are working on. This procedure works especially well if you work in a team. All team members can generate ideas, with one member acting as scribe. Do not worry about editing or throwing out what might not be a good idea. Simply write down as many possibilities as you can.
- If this is a topic that you have little experience with, you might consider finding a few basic resources on the topic and skimming them for terms or phrases that appear often.
- Group the items that you have listed according to categories that make sense to you. Are things thematically related?
- Give each group a label. Now you have a narrower topic with possible points of development.
- Write a sentence about the label/title you have given the group of ideas. Now you have a topic sentence or possibly a thesis statement.

Here is an example of what listing may look like:

Topic: <u>Homelessness</u>

Mental health	Housing First Movement	Gentrification
Housing shortage	Urban cities	Housing prices
Veterans	Criminal history	Pandemic
Domestic violence	Unemployment	Evictions
Substance abuse	Women and children	Section 8
Tiny homes	Ex-inmates	Job training
Healthcare	N.I.M.B.Y.	

Now that we have a variety of terms, we can start to place them into groups.

Group A: Causes	**Group B: Affected People**	**Group C: Solutions**
Gentrification	Veterans	Mental health
Housing shortage	Women and children	Tiny homes
Domestic violence	Mental health	Section 8
Substance abuse	Ex-inmates	Healthcare
Unemployment	Evicted people	Housing first movement
N.I.M.B.Y	Lower income people	Job training
Housing prices		More affordable housing
Pandemic		
Mental Health		
Evictions		

1. Listing (continued)

You can see that we have the terms now listed in themed groups. You may also notice that mental health is listed in all three areas. This is because we have determined that mental health plays a role as a cause of homelessness, is an issue with many unhoused people, and needs to be a part of the solution to homelessness.

Now we can create a topic sentence about one of the collections of terms. Here is a sentence connected to the group of words titles "Solutions."

Ex: Some of the solutions involved in combating homelessness are improved mental health care, an increase in Section 8 and affordable housing, and job training programs.

This topic sentence can now help you determine the direction of this paper. By using the other categories of terms to create other topic sentences, you will have a solid foundation for your paper and a direction for further research.

Topic: _____

Groups:

Group A:	Group B:	Group C:

Topic Sentence: _____

_____

2. Clustering

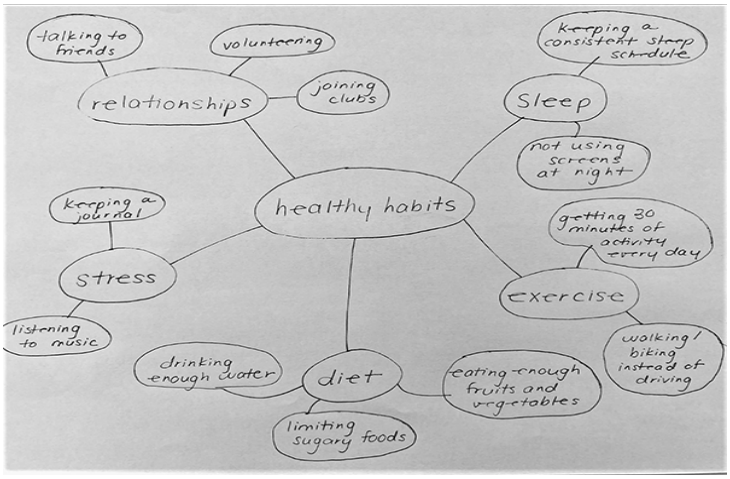
Clustering, also known as mind mapping or idea mapping, is a strategy that allows you to explore the relationships between ideas.

- Put the subject in the center of a page. Circle or underline it.
- As you think of other ideas, write them on the page surrounding the central idea. Link the new ideas to the central circle with lines.
- As you think of ideas that relate to the new ideas, add to those in the same way.

The result will probably look like a web on your page. Locate clusters of interest to you and use the terms you attached to the key ideas as departure points for your paper (you can go from your cluster into the prewriting strategy of listing).

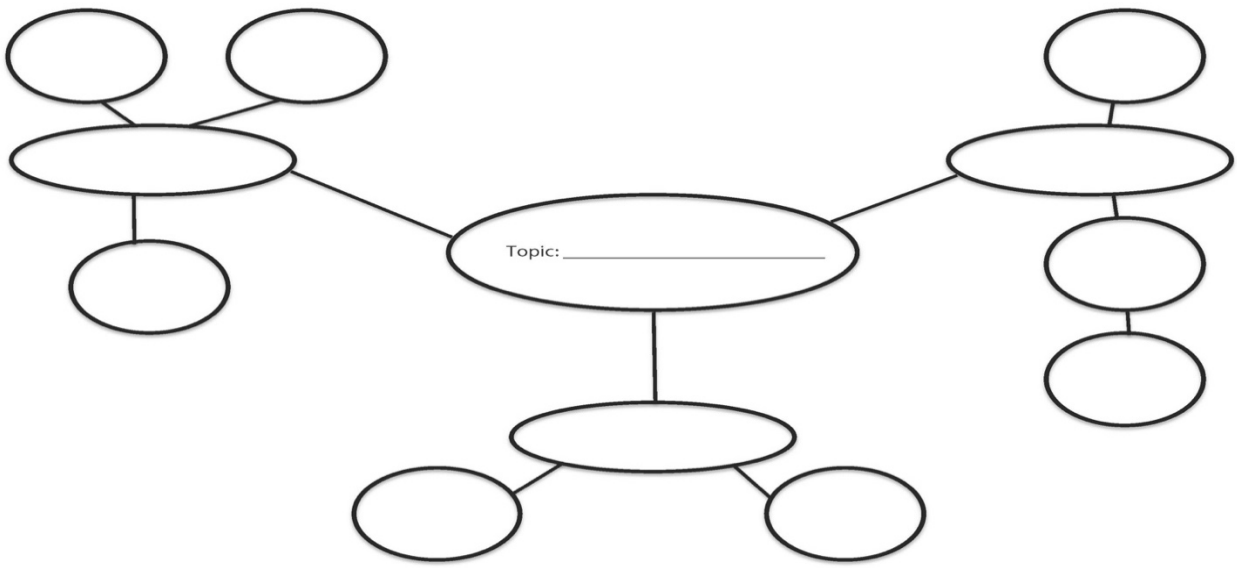
Clustering is especially useful in determining the relationship between ideas. You will be able to distinguish how the ideas fit together, especially where there is an abundance of ideas. Clustering your ideas lets you visualize them in a different way, so that you can more readily understand possible directions your paper may take.

Here is an example of a cluster map about healthy habits:



Source: Iowa Reading Research Center; https://iowareadingresearch.org/blog/prewriting-reduce-writing-apprehension

Cluster Diagram Template



3. Freewriting

Freewriting is a process of generating information by writing non-stop in full sentences for a predetermined amount of time. It allows you to focus on a specific topic, and it forces you to write quickly so that you are unable to edit any of your ideas.

- Freewrite on an assignment or general topic for five to ten minutes **non-stop** (you can even start with three-minute bursts if that feels better for you). Force yourself to continue writing even if nothing specific comes to mind (so you could end up writing "I don't know what to write about" over and over until an idea "pops" into your head. This is okay; the important thing is that you do not stop writing). This freewriting will include many ideas; at this point, generating ideas is what is important, not the grammar or the spelling.
- The key to freewriting is to not correct yourself or focus too much on writing well. The point of the strategy is to generate ideas. It is very likely that none of the actual sentences you write will end up in your essay.
- After you have finished freewriting, look back over what you have written and highlight the most prominent and interesting ideas; then you can begin all over again, with a tighter focus (see #4 Looping). You will narrow your topic, and in the process, you will generate several relevant points about the topic.

Free Write:

4. Looping

Looping is a freewriting technique that allows you to focus your ideas continually while trying to discover a writing topic. After you freewrite for the first time, identify a key thought or idea in your writing, and begin to freewrite again, with that idea as your starting point. You will loop one 5–10-minute freewriting after another, so you have a sequence of freewritings, each more specific than the last. The same rules that apply to freewriting apply to looping: write quickly, do not edit, and do not stop.

Loop your freewriting as many times as necessary, circling another interesting topic, idea, phrase, or sentence each time. When you have finished four or five rounds of looping, you will begin to have specific information that indicates what you are thinking about a particular topic. You may even have the basis for a tentative thesis or an improved idea for an approach to your assignment when you have finished.

Looping:

5. The Journalists' Questions

Journalists traditionally ask questions when they are writing assignments. These questions are known as “Wh” questions (*Who?, What?*, *Where?*, *When?*, *Why?*, and *How?)* You can use these questions to explore the topic you are writing about for an assignment. A key to using the journalists' questions is to make them flexible enough to account for the specific details of your topic. For instance, if your topic is the rise and fall of the Puget Sound tides and its effect on salmon spawning, you may have very little to say about *Who* if your focus does not account for human involvement. On the other hand, some topics may be heavy on the *Who*, especially if human involvement is a crucial part of the topic.

The journalists' questions are a powerful way to develop a great deal of information about a topic very quickly. However, learning to ask the appropriate questions about a topic takes practice. At times, during writing an assignment, you may wish to go back and ask the journalists' questions again to clarify important points that may be getting lost in your planning and drafting.

Possible generic questions you can ask using the six journalists' questions follow:

- **Who?** Who are the participants? Who is affected? Who are the primary actors? Who are the secondary actors? Who are credible sources of information?
- **What?** What is the topic? What is the significance of the topic? What is the basic problem? What are the issues related to that problem? What are current developments related to the topic?
- **Where?** Where does the activity take place? Where does the problem or issue have its source? At what place is the cause or effect of the problem most visible?
- **When?** When is the issue most apparent? (in the past? present? future?) When did the issue or problem develop? What historical forces helped shape the problem or issue and at what point in time will the problem or issue culminate in a crisis? When is action needed to address the issue or problem?
- **Why?** Why did the issue or problem arise? Why is it (your topic) an issue or problem at all? Why did the issue or problem develop in the way that it did?
- **How?** How is the issue or problem significant? How can it be addressed? How is it being addressed? How does it affect the participants? How can the issue or problem be resolved?

Adapted from the University of Kansas Writing Center

Who?_____

_____

_____

What?_____

_____

_____

Where?_____

_____

_____

When?_____

_____

_____

Why?_____

_____

_____

How?_____

_____

_____