

Pre-Writing

(This resource was created by Richard Wing, Yale University, July 2009)

Pre-writing is perhaps the most important part of the writing process as it lays a foundation for the writing that is to come. During this stage, writers establish the purpose of the work and the audience for whom it will be written as well as their argument and an outline for the piece. It is also a period during which preliminary research on the topic is conducted. Optimal pre-writing strategies eliminate confusion and minimize writer's block while actually writing. Therefore, a mastery of pre-writing strategies is an invaluable investment that is a must for any serious, academic writer.

That's great, but what do I actually do before I write my piece? Before you actually start writing, you need to get a few things together. Think about it like building a house: you're going to need a plan, building materials, some tools, and a few people to help you out.

A Plan and Building Materials

Before you actually do any writing, you should really have a plan. What goes into a plan?

Step 1: The Purpose and The Audience

Before you even begin to think about what you're going to say, you need to think about why you're bothering to say it at all. What is the purpose of this writing? Are you writing an argumentative essay, a research paper, or a creative piece? Defining your purpose early on is essential because it leads directly to formulating general goals for your written piece. For example:

Why am I writing this guide?: I am writing this guide to provide a general overview of the pre-writing process and some tips for how to execute the steps involved.

Knowing your purpose beforehand keeps your mind focused when making decisions about your research and thesis later on. In this case, since I've decided to speak in general terms, I will not elaborate on the specifics of science pre-writing or about techniques to use once "writing" has actually begun. This focus will save me time and energy throughout the rest of the pre-writing process.

Once you've decided upon a purpose, you can move on to making decisions about your audience (and, really, language and scope). Your choice of audience will affect how you speak and what you say. For instance, think about the differences between explaining the same concept to a young child and an adult, science student. Your choice of vocabulary, analogies, tone, and, most importantly, scope would probably be different. For example, consider the following:

Framed for a child: An Irishmen, John Tyndall figured out why the sky is blue. A type of gas called oxygen, which we also need to live, lets blue light shine through the brightest of all the colors. That's why the sky is blue.

Framed for an adult, science student: The Tyndall effect, named after John Tyndall, an Irishmen, explains why the sky has a blue color. In essence, the intensity of light refracted by ozone in the atmosphere is inversely proportional to the wavelength of said light. Therefore, since blue light has the shortest wavelength within the visible spectrum, it exhibits the brightest intensity when refracted by ozone.

A child won't be familiar with terms like intensity, wavelength, ozone, or refraction. Additionally, knowing that the air in the atmosphere affects color is of primary interest for the child. The science student, however, is going to be interested (and required to know about) more advanced concepts. Therefore, knowing your audience beforehand is critical because it frames how you will think about and, ultimately, explain your topic during the pre-writing process.

Step 2: Preliminary research materials

Reading is essential to the process of writing. You need to be aware of as much information as possible in order to formulate an effective argument. You cannot complete all of the research that will be necessary to write your piece at this point. But, you can gather enough information to decide upon what has been said and what remains to be seen. For example, you want to:

1. Compile a list of references that might be useful for your writing.
2. Briefly read these references to get a sense of where the topic stands.
3. Begin thinking about what you can contribute, and write your ideas down.

Once you have conducted enough research, you can begin to think about what you're actually going to contribute.

Step 3: The Thesis and The Outline

Now, you should be ready to formulate your thesis and prepare an outline for your piece. The thesis needs to be clear so that the reader knows how to focus in on what you say throughout your piece. For example:

Vague: Global Warming is real. Despite this, there is still a debate raging about what is actually happening with Earth's climate.

Clear: The existence of Global Warming is supported by a bevy of data including temperature measurements over the last 100 years as well as ice core samples that measure the levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide over geologic time. These data refute the hypothesis that the carbon dioxide levels within Earth's atmosphere are fluctuating within parameters that are consistent with Earth's geologic history.

What does “real” mean? It’s vague. And, sure a debate is raging about Earth’s climate, but what is the point here, exactly? The second statement is clear: Global Warming is supported by data, and we’re going to argue that the opposing theory is incorrect. The clearer your thesis statement is, the easier it will be to argue your point and write your piece.

Once you’ve prepared a thesis statement, you’re going to need a road map to lay out how you will defend your argument. A rough outline that defines the major sections of your argument will serve this purpose. There’s no need to get too detailed here. You just need a series of “buckets” in which to throw ideas. For example,

- I. Brief Introduction
- II. Thesis (arguments)
- III. Background to understand evidence
- IV. First piece of evidence
- V. Second piece of evidence
- VI. Third piece of evidence
- VII. Conclusion
- VIII. References

This form of organization may seem intuitive as in, “I know these things need to go into my piece already.” The point of making the outline is to have something visual that helps you organize your thoughts when you get to the actual writing. It also gives you a rough “progress bar” so you can see how you’re progressing as you write.

Tools

In order to get any job done right, you’re going to need a good set of tools. The most important thing to be aware of is that you need to pick tools that work for you. In a physical sense tools are things like pens, pencils, paper, computers, chalk, etc. In an environmental sense, tools can be things like your home, the library, a coffee shop, the laboratory, etc.

You need to use the tools that will help you to write the best. For instance, while your computer can provide you with the resources of the internet and allow you to write faster, it may actually hinder your progress. This can be the case if you are addicted to email or surfing the web. Also, while it may be physically easier to work from your home, you may find that you have trouble focusing there. The library or even a coffee shop may provide with you a setting in which you can focus better.

Fresh Eyes (i.e., other people)

Your friends, coworkers, colleagues, advisors, etc. are invaluable assets when trying to formulate and organize an argument. Ask them for assistance when you get stuck or when you need an opinion on things like clarity and flow. A fresh set of eyes

can help you to see things in a new light or to clear up a muddled argument or a vague thesis statement. Furthermore, don't simply ask them to read and comment. You can do things like have a discussion with someone and see what they say. Do they refute your argument? They might mention things that make your argument stronger.