

“Writing is just having a sheet of paper, a pen and not a shadow of an idea of what you’re going to say.”
 —Francois Sagon

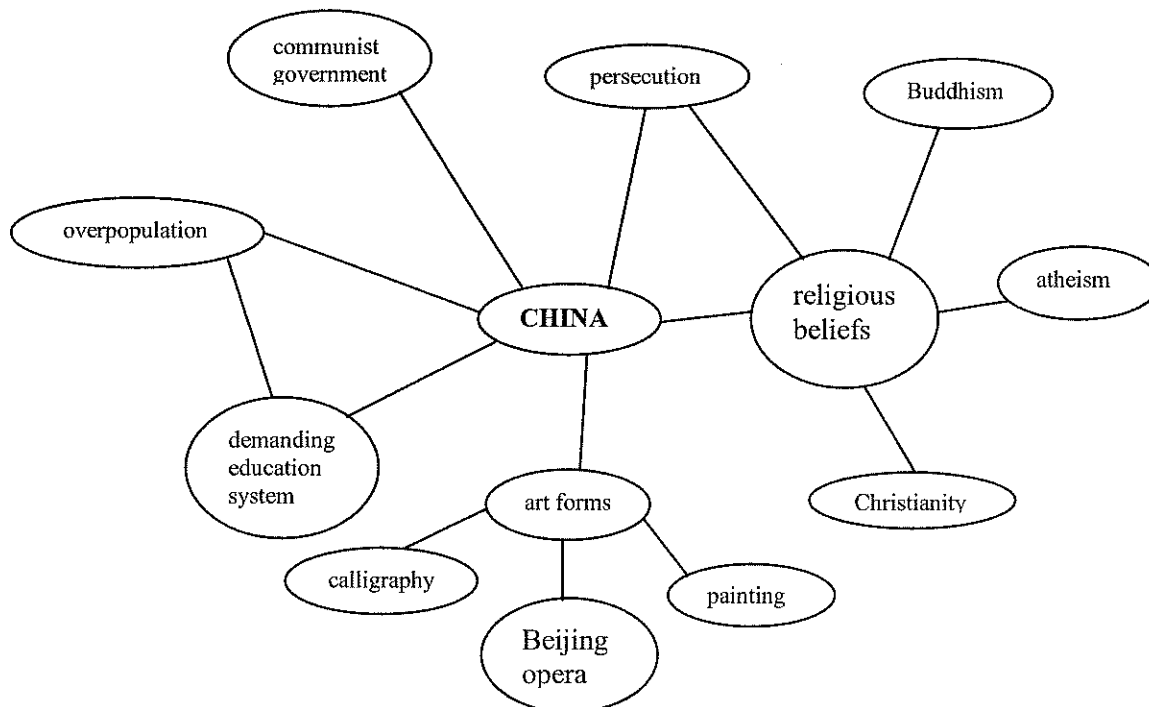
Prewriting

Every author fears it: that dreadful paralysis in front of a blank computer screen or a stark, white sheet of paper. “What do I write?” “How do I express my scattered thoughts?” “How do I overcome my fear of this assignment?!”

Whether writing a narrative, persuasive argument, or research essay, **prewriting** is a vital part of the writing process. It is a helpful tool for stimulating thoughts, choosing and narrowing down a topic, and organizing ideas. Writers may choose from a variety of prewriting techniques, including *brainstorming*, *clustering*, and *freewriting*.

Brainstorming: In thinking about the assignment, write down whatever thoughts enter your mind, no matter how strange or irrelevant they may seem. For example, if your topic is to write an informative/research paper on AIDS in Africa, you might write down anything that comes to mind about AIDS in Africa: STDs, few doctors, limited medicine, prostitution, despair, orphans, hopelessness, grandparents as guardians, need for physical and moral education, etc.

Clustering: Begin with a word, circle it, and draw lines from the circle to other ideas as they occur to you. You may circle these new ideas and look for relationships between the various ideas, connecting them with lines. The movement here is from a general topic (in the center circle) to specific aspects of that topic (in the off-shooting circles).



Freewriting: Set a time limit (ten to fifteen minutes is suggested) and write in complete sentences as quickly as possible. Do not allow yourself to pause for correction or to stop for deep thought. If nothing comes to mind,

write, “Nothing comes to mind,” until a new thought strikes you. The purpose is to focus and generate material while postponing criticism and editing for later. Journal writing and rough drafts are often a form of freewriting.

No matter which method of prewriting you choose, a key to success is to turn off the editor or critic within yourself and work as swiftly and freely as possible. Most writers have an inner critic which assesses their writing as they compose. Although this critic is valuable in rewriting a paper, its judgmental character hinders thought flow in the initial stages of writing. The best way to prewrite is to ignore the voice of your inner critic and write fluidly without stopping to correct mistakes.

Outline

Constructing an outline is one of the best organizational techniques in preparing to write a paper. In making a basic outline, begin with a thesis and decide on the major points of the paper. Under these major points list specific subpoints. According to section 1.8 in the MLA Handbook, the descending parts of an outline are normally labeled in the following order: I., A., 1., a., (1), (a). Remember that if an outline includes a *I.*, logic requires that it include a *II.* If there is an *A.*, there needs to be a *B.*

Thesis: Saga deserves a #1 rating in the Princeton Review.

- I. There is a wide variety of food.
 - A. Pizza
 1. Saga is always creating new types of pizza.
 - a. Mushroom and Spinach
 - b. Taco Pizza
 2. The crust of the pizza is usually soft and tasty.
 - B. Vegetarian Food
 1. Falafel
 2. Coos Coos
 3. Stuffed Portabello Mushrooms
 - C. Cereal
 1. Ten different kinds are always available
 2. Saga is continually rotating the selection.
- II. Saga’s atmosphere is conducive to students’ social needs.
 - A. etc.

Common organizing principles are chronology (useful for historical discussions – e.g., how the Mexican War developed); cause and effect (e.g., what consequences a scientific discovery will have); process (e.g., how a politician got elected); and deductive and inductive logic. A deductive line of argument moves from the general to the specific (e.g., from the problem of violence in the United States to violence involving handguns), and an inductive one moves from the specific to the general (e.g., from violence involving handguns to the problem of violence in the United States). (See Write Right 3 for additional discussion of paragraph organization, and see Write Right 5 for organizational strategies with special paragraphs.)

Internet Resources:

- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_plan1.html
- http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_outlin.html
- <http://www.powa.org/thesfirms.htm>
- <http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/acen/writerslab/handouts/organization.htm>
- <http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/acen/writerslab/handouts/writersblock.htm>
- <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/readassign.html>
- <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/readingwriting.html>