



**The Weissman Center for Leadership and the Liberal Arts
The Speaking, Arguing, and Writing Program
122 Porter Hall**

Starting the Writing Process by Prewriting

What is Prewriting?

Sometimes when you are given an assignment, you know just what it is you want to write about and have no trouble outlining your ideas or heading towards a first draft. More often, however, it takes time to figure out what you want to say. “Prewriting” is a term used to describe the process of creating, exploring, and organizing ideas before beginning to compose a first draft of a paper.

Types of Prewriting:

Freewriting

When you freewrite, you write down everything you think you know for five or ten minutes. Don’t worry about spelling or getting all of the facts right. In the following examples, the student is trying to address this topic: “How did musicals contribute to the development of art in the United States?” Here is the beginning of her freewriting:

Musicals grew out of stage traditions like vaudeville. Musicals have been on the stage and in films, though film musicals went out of style for a while, but they seem to be coming back (Moulan(?) Rouge, Chicago). Film musicals started with sound and *The Jazz Singer* in 1920-something. Are different from regular films because the storyline gets interrupted by song and dance. Also, women star in musicals (Astaire *and* Rogers) and don’t get to star in a lot of other genres. Something about musical theater being really popular and musicals on Broadway being better investments than straight plays...

Everything you free write will not be added to your final draft; remember, this is writing before you start composing the paper. Whether you decide to keep your ideas or not, the activity has done its job if it leads you to one or two thoughts for your paper. Once you have a focus for the paper, the composing will be less frustrating.

Brainstorming

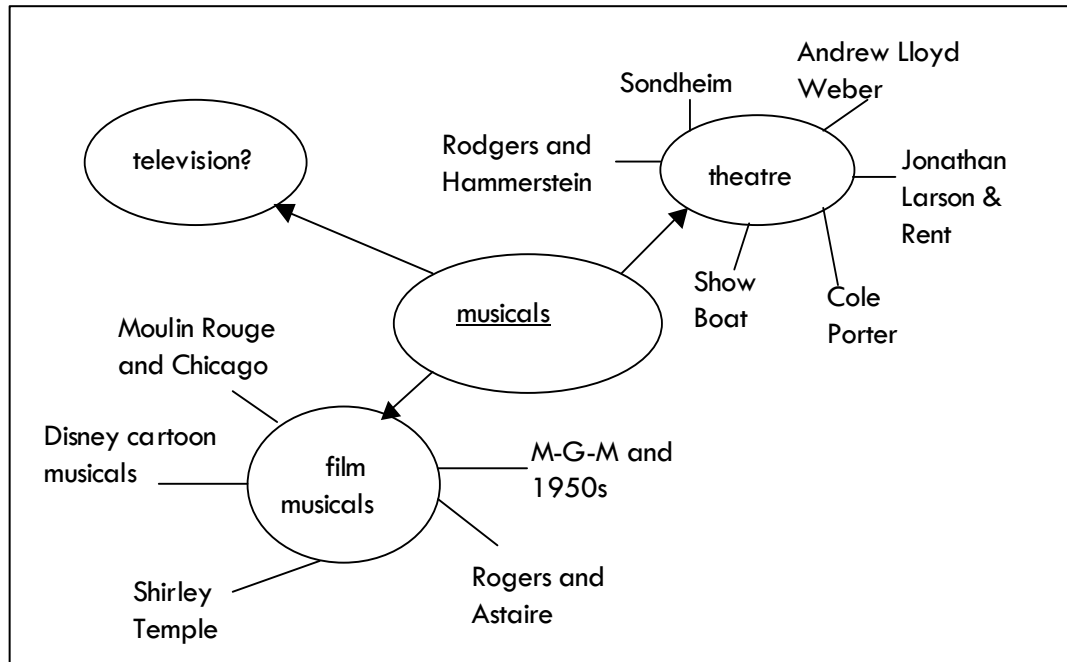
Like freewriting, there are no wrong answers when you brainstorm. List the first things that come to your mind.

Gene Kelly	1927 – first sound movie
Fred Astaire	Jeanette MacDonald – opera and film
Ginger Rogers (danced on air?)	tap dance, ballet dance, modern dance
current revival of musicals	Rent – deals with AIDS
Agnes DeMille/Oklahoma!	are musicals are an American invention

When you write down everything you know, you can see which ideas you like or don’t like. Though it’s the last thing she wrote down, this student may find that she is interested in pursuing her ideas about African-American musicals.

Mapping

Mapping provides some sort of categorization or framework for your ideas, a visualization of how your ideas may be connected. Mapping is very useful in conjunction with brainstorming.



From mapping, this student discovers that she is more interested in writing about musicals through their venues rather than telling a chronological story. In addition, she notices that most of her initial thoughts on theatrical musicals are focused on songwriters. From mapping, she may decide that she wants to focus her essay on the contributions of songwriters to musical theater. If so, she already has a preliminary list of the songwriters she may want to write about.

When you sit down to prewrite, don't feel the need to stick to one method of developing your thoughts. Use one, use them all, or mix some together – whatever helps you get started writing is the best method for you!

Sources:

Leki, Ilona. *Academic Writing: Techniques and Tasks*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
Raimes, Ann. *Keys for Writers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/go/saw>

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