

## pre-writing

When you have decided upon a paper topic, it's time to start prewriting. "Prewriting" is all the work you do before you start composing the actual paper. This means more than doing research, organizing your thoughts and planning the paper. It means doing what you can to engage the material, to think things through and weigh your ideas. In short, it includes everything to do with gaining mastery over the subject.

What you actually need to do will vary by assignment, but the following techniques are generally applicable and useful. You should also make up your own techniques and try other ways of engaging the material. Find and use whatever works best for you.

Your prewriting exercises needn't be done in any particular order. They don't have to be finished to be useful, and you can always come back to change things. If you're not sure you're on the right track, you can show some of your prewriting to your professor. This will help show her exactly where you are, which makes it easier for her to help you. Remember that none of your prewriting is (normally) graded. Thus you should avoid trying to get stuff that looks like "good" prewriting but instead do things that help you understand the material better.

**QUOTE SHEET:** copy out a quotation from the text onto a blank piece of paper and then do your best to say exactly what that quote means in your own words. Do this for any quotes you think are crucial for the topic you're thinking of writing about. The aim is to get the real meaning of a piece of text as clear as possible. Clear thinking requires messy notes, so don't be afraid of false starts, mistakes and repeated effort.

**DEFINITION SHEET:** Take an important word and try to define the concept it represents in your own words. You should do this for any word you're not sure about, or which you think is important to the argument. Use your own words to describe what you think the author means by the word. Don't put down the dictionary definition and don't put down the definition you're used to using. Figure out what the author means and put that down as well as you can.

**ARGUMENT SHEET:** Take an important or controversial claim and write it down together with the reasons that are supposed to support it. An argument sheet should be your best effort to get one argument as clear as you can. Lay it out in numbered premises above a conclusion and use your own words. Try to figure out what's been left out or taken for granted. Weaknesses can be hidden in unstated premises and unexamined assumptions. Make the argument as strong as you can, even if you intend to refute it eventually. Be prepared to do several sheets for one argument, as some arguments have premises that need arguments of their own. It's also important to do this for any argument you think you might have to criticize or defend.

**EXAMPLE SHEET:** Make up your own example to clarify some complicated concept.

**COGNITIVE MAP:** Write down the names of important concepts and connect the names with lines to show how they're related. Cognitive maps are an easy, quick and effective way to organize your thoughts on any topic. Take a blank piece of paper, write the name of an important topic in the middle, circle it and connect it with lines to the names of related ideas, also circled. Add ideas as they occur to you and connect them to each other as you think fit. Fool around with this as long as you're interested in it. If you're working on a thesis, connect it with everything that might be relevant to the truth of your thesis. Then work in the things that support your thesis or defend it from possible criticisms.

When you've done all the sheets you think you might need, spread everything out on a table and think about different ways to bring it all together. Look for gaps; is anything missing? Or contradictions; does any sheet say (or imply) the opposite of any other sheet? Gaps and contradictions are important. They

can expose ideas that won't be obvious to other people, ideas that could be relevant to your topic. They could even give you an idea for a thesis.