

# General Prewriting Guidelines for Essays

*Note: These general guidelines apply to the writing of a variety of genres or text types. The guidelines are designed to help students become thoughtful and process-oriented, rather than product-oriented, readers and writers. They are not meant as a strict sequence for prewriting. Writing is a recursive process, and a student may choose to develop the thesis or central/controlling idea after generating and organizing ideas related to the topic.*

## Read and Understand the Prompt or Assignment

Prompts or writing assignments are often jam-packed with text. This can make it difficult to locate the key information that tells students what they need to know about the topic.

Suggestions for teaching students to read and understand writing prompts or assignments include the following:

- **Read** through the entire prompt or assignment.
- Then **reread** the prompt, sentence by sentence.
- **Circle words or phrases that are not recognized and understood.** Think about how the words are being used. Try to figure out what the words mean in relation to the words surrounding them. Use a dictionary or thesaurus to determine and/or confirm word meanings.
- **Lightly section off information about writing logistics** (length/page requirements, grading criteria, formatting guidelines, due dates, etc.). This leaves the information directly related to the essay's specified topic and purpose. While the logistical information is important, it can overwhelm and camouflage what the essay is supposed to be about.
- **Underline or highlight any sentences that are either questions or commands.** Look for key words, such as *argue*, *compare*, *cover*, *discuss*, or *list*. For example: "Discuss three examples of pollutants, *compare* and *contrast* them, and *argue* which is the worst." These key words also help to establish the purpose of an essay. Optional: Write the questions and imperatives at the top of the page.
- **Identify whether the topic is specified**, or if students have a choice about what will be written about. If it is specified, do your students have a clear understanding of what the topic is?
- **Determine the purpose of the assignment or prompt.** Teach students to use the key words to help them: Is it to explain or prove? Think about how the purpose affects the type of writing your students will do. Teach students to narrow the topic based on the purpose for writing.
- **Look for any information about the audience.** Teach students to ask themselves if there is any information in the prompt or assignment about the audience for whom they

will be writing. Teach them to think about what most people know about the topic.

- **Determine the type of essay required.** Teach students to try to imagine what kind of essay they'll be writing based on the prompt or assignment. Have criteria been established for how the writing will be evaluated? Is a rubric included? Teach students to think about similar types of writing that they have done and to ask questions when they are not sure of the task.

### Sample Key Words

Key Word	Description
Analyze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break the issue or problem into separate parts. Discuss, examine, or interpret the parts and how they are related.</li> <li>• Look at the validity and persuasiveness of any reasons/supporting facts/evidence given for a position. Determine if the conclusion is justified on the basis of these claims.</li> </ul>
Compare and Contrast	Describe similarities and differences between two or more objects, situations, or ideas. May need to look at a before-and-after comparison.
Define	Tell or explain what a particular word or term means in the essay. Go beyond a dictionary definition to clarify the way in which the term or phrase is being used.
Describe	Give a detailed account, naming characteristics, parts, or qualities.
Discuss	Include explanations, reasoning, pro and con arguments, examples, analysis, and so forth.
Evaluate	Determine the value of something to discover how good or bad it is. May involve arguing that something is good or bad and explaining the logic of the reasoning. Is based on relevant evidence.
Explain	Help the reader understand the reasoning behind a position by showing logical development. May need to demonstrate how something works or how to do something step by step (procedural).
Illustrate	Give examples (not draw pictures) to clarify and elaborate ideas.
Prove	Support opinions with logical arguments and evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and/or expressions of commonly accepted beliefs.
State	Tell the reader opinions and/or facts in a convincing and concise way.

REFERENCE: Adapted from The California State University Expository Reading and Writing Course, 2008.

## Develop the Thesis Statement or Central/Controlling Idea

*Note: Specific guidelines for expository essays, persuasive essays, and personal narratives are included in separate handouts.*

Tips for developing a clear and concise thesis or central/controlling idea include the following:

- **Get to the point.** Teach students to answer the question “What are you going to write about and why is it important?” Often, the answer to this question becomes the thesis!
- **Be sure of yourself.** Teach students to write like they believe it. Why should the reader believe a thesis or central/controlling idea if students don’t sound like they believe it? Teach students to avoid words and phrases like *I think, I believe, might, maybe, and possibly*.
- **Don’t believe the one-sentence myth.** Teach students that a thesis or central/controlling idea can be more than one sentence long. The thesis statement should be as concise as possible, but sometimes it may take more than one sentence to state the purpose and main focus/point of the essay.
- **Don’t be afraid of change.** Teach students that if, while writing the essay, they realize they have lost focus and are writing about something different than what the thesis or central/controlling idea says—and they think the new idea is better than what was originally planned—to go with it and revise the thesis or central/controlling idea!
- **Clearly address the topic or prompt.** Questions to ask include the following:
  - **So what?** Does the thesis or central/controlling idea teach the readers something new or does it challenge an idea they have? Why is it significant? Does it compel the reader to think differently or take action? How much background information do the readers need to understand the topic and the thesis? Why should the reader care about the topic/subject?
  - **What are its implications?** What will have to change if the thesis or central/controlling idea is true? Will people have to think differently, take action, and/or change a policy? Does the essay present a new or different perspective? Teach students to ask themselves if they can support the thesis or controlling idea with evidence.
  - **Is it original?** Nothing is more boring to readers than something they’ve already heard before. Although the author may believe passionately in something and want to present the argument or position in a certain way, he or she should try to offer something different than what most readers have already heard.
  - **Is it focused enough?** Focus on a sufficiently narrow aspect of the subject area. Topics that are too broad or large need to be limited or narrowed so that the writer has a manageable topic to develop.

## Generate and Organize Ideas Related to the Topic

After the topic or subject is identified and/or the thesis is developed, teach students to think about the main points and supporting ideas related to the topic. A variety of idea-generation strategies are typically taught and used to help students come up with these points and ideas. These strategies are designed to help students brainstorm as many related facts, examples, reasons, incidents, comparisons, contrasts, and causes/effects that they can think of before they begin to write their essays.

Typical brainstorming strategies include the following:

- **Free association.** As the most commonly used brainstorming technique, free association is useful for generating topic ideas and developing supporting arguments. This method can help students conceptualize a lot of different thoughts and ideas about their topic. The steps in this strategy include the following:
  - **Write the topic or thesis sentence** on the top of a piece of paper.
  - **Circle the key words.**
  - **List anything that relates to that topic.** Think of related terms from class and from readings. Include ideas that are related to the general topic.
  - **Examine the list.** Are any of your ideas similar or related? Divide these ideas into separate groups, or connect them with lines.
  - **Weigh relevance.** There may be ideas that don't relate to the topic. If these ideas seem to have potential but don't have enough evidentiary support, forget about including them for now. Teach students that they can always come back to them later, if need be.
- **Webbing/Clustering.** Mapping ideas that come to mind about a topic is another popular brainstorming strategy. The strategy typically involves these steps:
  - **Write a key word or phrase** in the center of a page with a circle drawn around it.
  - **Write related ideas** around the circle. Draw lines to signify which ideas should be classified together. Identify subtopics to the main topic during this process.
  - **Add supporting details** that branch off the subtopics.

By grouping ideas together in this fashion, students automatically begin to order and decide what they want to say and, often, how they want to say it. Once students have recognized how the ideas are clustered or structured in the web or map, they can focus their energy on drafting and explaining the branches or links between the main ideas/points.

- **Informal outlining.** This strategy involves listing main ideas and the details related to the topic in the order in which they will be addressed. If ideas are randomly listed during a free-association brainstorming activity, they can be numbered to show the proposed progression and development of ideas within the essay.

REFERENCE: Virgil Undergraduate Writing Center, 2001–2005.