

Pre-Writing: Brainstorming, Organizing, and Outlining Ideas

“A basic structural design underlies every kind of writing.” — Strunk and White, *Elements of Style*

Just as a builder would not try to construct a building without an architectural plan, a writer should not attempt an academic paper without prewriting first. As the name implies, pre-writing happens before a draft, and its purpose is to inform (“build”) the content and guide the direction (“structure”) of the actual writing yet to come. Prewriting consists of 3 basic steps: brainstorming, organizing, and outlining ideas. If the prewriting phase is overlooked or done in haste, the paper will lack organization, focus and support and, like our hypothetical building, fall apart due to structural weakness.

Brainstorming is a strategy that allows your mind to free-associate spontaneous and random ideas. Instead of struggling to consciously think of what to put down on that empty page or blank computer screen (every writer’s nightmare!), it frees up the sub-conscious to draw upon a vast sea of accumulated prior knowledge. Here are a few strategies you might use to brainstorm:

Freewriting

Write (preferably by hand) non-stop for a set period of time, say 3 minutes. Then, review what has been written to locate the main idea, which is often just a key word or phrase. This is often most productive in your native language; you can always translate the key vocabulary afterwards and write in the language of your audience moving forward.

Looping

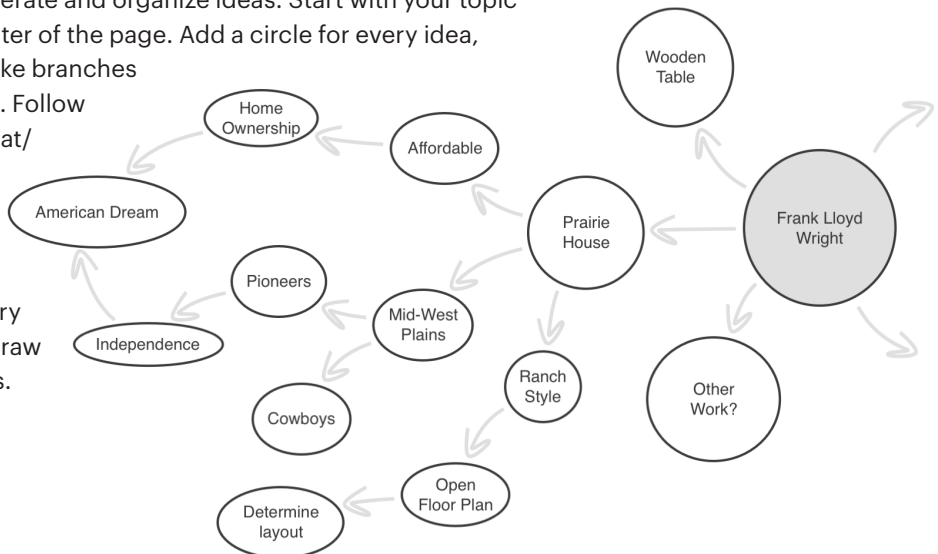
After freewriting, use the identified main idea as a starting point and continue to free-write for another 3 minutes. You might repeat the process to get closer and closer to an interesting idea that inspires you and feels worth writing about.

Listing

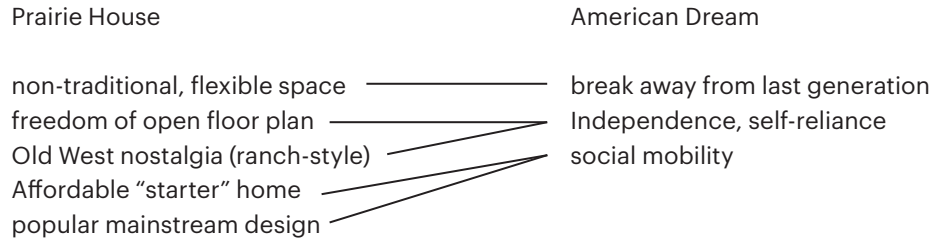
Write ideas down quickly in a vertical column as they occur, without regard to hierarchy, organization or connectivity. This is true “stream of consciousness,” but having some kind of limit is helpful: either time (say, 3-5 minutes) or length (a full sheet of paper).

Clustering or Mind-Mapping

This is a visual way to both generate and organize ideas. Start with your topic or prompt in a circle at the center of the page. Add a circle for every idea, radiating out from the center like branches extending outward from a tree. Follow ideas to their end; ask who/what/where/when/why at dead ends to generate more ideas. Don’t be afraid to include “bad” ideas or topics you probably won’t use later. Try to cluster related topics, and draw lines to show new connections.



Organizing helps you make connections between your ideas and start to form a working thesis — a purpose for further research and writing. You could rebuild your mind-map or create a new list; in either case, be more deliberate about creating categories and topics for related details. This is also an opportunity to discard the inconsequential or off-topic, and notice gaps.



Outlining allows you to create a strong, supported structure for your writing. However formal or informal, an outline follows a hierarchy of large, complex ideas, followed by smaller details that support them. Notice how each section is a piece of the working thesis statement containing evidence to prove the point. An outline will help you make sure the content applies to the thesis and notice any changes that need to be made as your thesis develops.

