



Figure 1 Logos for the Academic Resource Center and The Writing Center

PREWRITING

Truth be told: if a writer sits around waiting for inspiration before they write, that person may never get anything written on the page. You see, inspiration does not occur often enough for writers to depend on it. In fact, inspiration occurs so rarely that writers must develop other means for getting their ideas. Collectively, the procedures for coming up with ideas in the absence of inspiration are called *prewriting*. The term *prewriting* is used because these procedures come before writing the first draft. Some others may also call these procedures *invention*.

There are four principal steps to the writing process: Prewriting, Drafting, Revising and Editing. This handout will focus on prewriting, for information on all other aspects of the writing process, see *The Writing Process* handout.

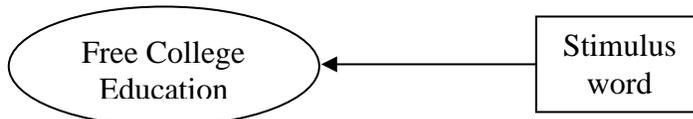
The following are different prewriting options:

1. **FREEWITING:** Freewriting allows a writer to generate thoughts that will help them formulate ideas to write about. Put your pen to the paper, and begin to write. Do not stop to think, organize, critique, etc. – Just write! Write as fast as you can-the faster, the better.

*Note: Grammar and spelling bogs down many writers – do not let it slow you down!

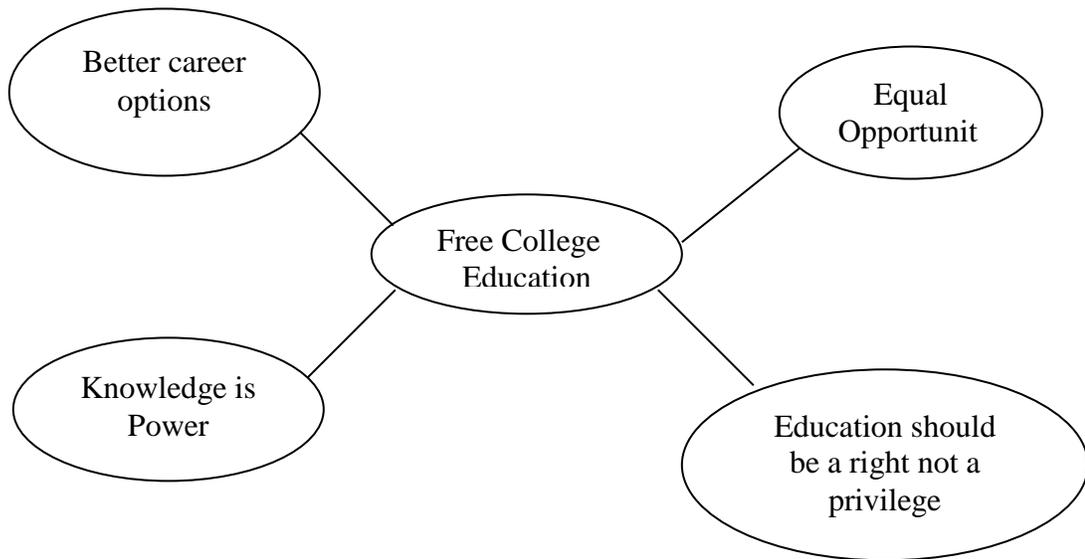
2. **CLUSTERING:** This is a good visual aid that shows the connection between thoughts and allows patterns to be seen. In the center of your page, write

the main idea or *stimulus word* that you are considering, and put a circle around it.



(A *stimulus word* is a word that helps ideas to flow)

As thoughts enter your mind, write them down, draw a circle around each, and connect the circles.

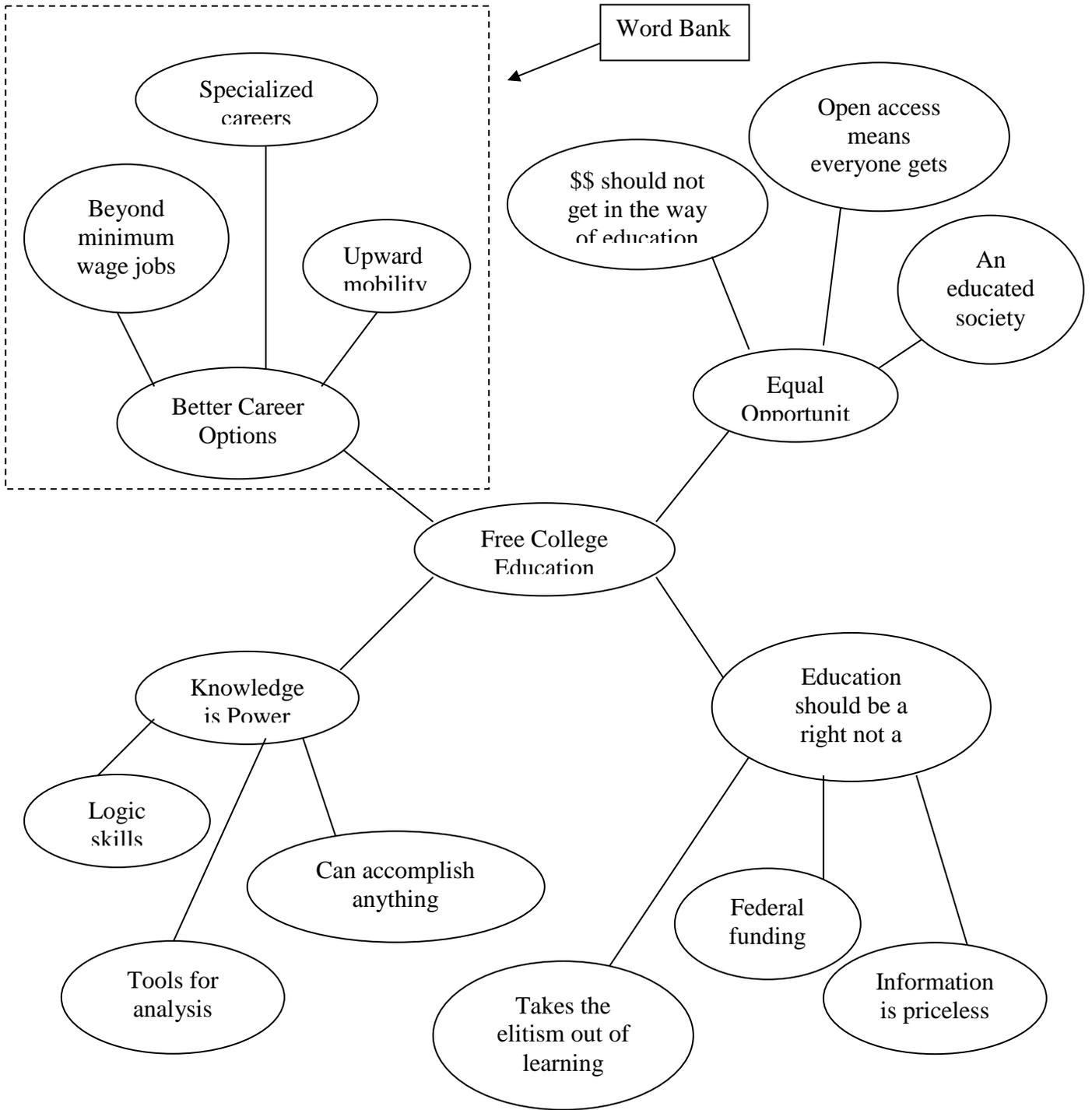


Continue expanding your thoughts as much as possible.

Exercise:

In the space below, use clustering to expand the above ideas. Come up with more subtopics for the bubbles, 'Better career options', 'Knowledge is power', 'Equal Opportunity', and 'Education should be a right not a privilege'.

The following is an example of clustering:



Continue until you cannot think of anything else to write. When you think you are done, look at what you have written, and decide if there is one particular subject or word bank that you think you will be able to write a draft about. For instance, maybe you think the word bank *Better Career Options* and the connecting circles are the most interesting and contain the most to write about.

POINTS TO PONDER:

- Do you think you could write an essay based on the ideas clustered here?
- Can you draw additional links between concepts?
- Are there ideas listed above that you would reject as irrelevant or too much to deal with?
- Can you think of some ideas, or a whole set of ideas, that should have been included but were not?
- What about the *negative aspects* of free college education? Should they be included in this essay?
- Can you come up with a *thesis statement* that would be appropriate for an essay based on this clustering of ideas?

3. VENN DIAGRAMS:

Another way to organize your prewriting ideas is by including them in a Venn diagram. A *Venn diagram* is a visual graph that is used to sum up complex situations. Use them to compare and contrast multiple ideas that have similarities and differences.

Below is an example:

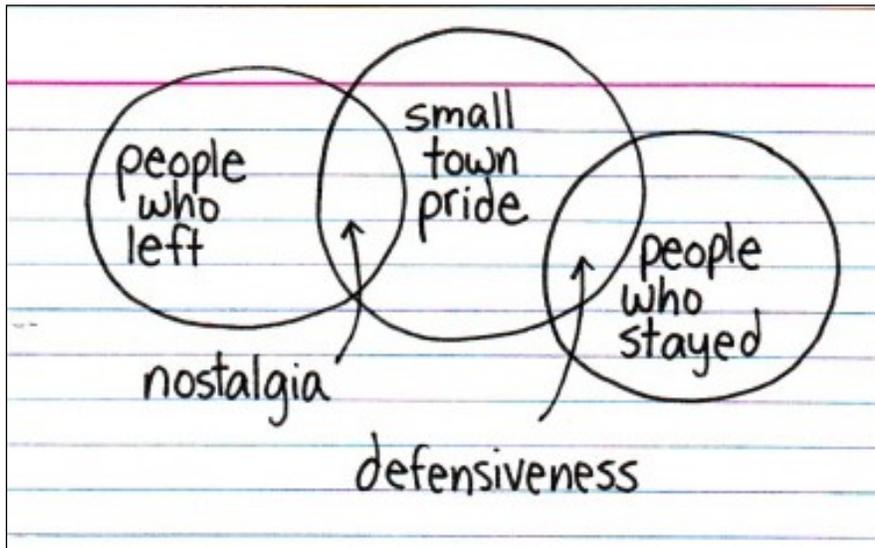


Figure 2 Example of a Written Cluster

In this Venn diagram, we are comparing three different ideas:

- people who left
- people with small town pride
- people who stayed in the small town

(Notice each group has its own circle)

There are overlapping areas where two circles share similarities where the arrows are pointing.

One arrow points to “nostalgia” or the fond feeling one experiences when thinking about a familiar memory. This is an area that both circles, “people who left” and “small town pride people” share, which means that both groups of people feel nostalgia.

Notice the other arrow that points to an area shared between the two circles, “small town pride people” and “people who stayed”. This means that both groups of people feel “defensiveness”.

When beginning an essay, one way would be to divide it into one paragraph about nostalgia and one about defensiveness.

Exercise: Practice making your own Venn diagram with three separate ideas that have similarities and differences. Use the space below to brainstorm. Then use the Venn Diagram below.

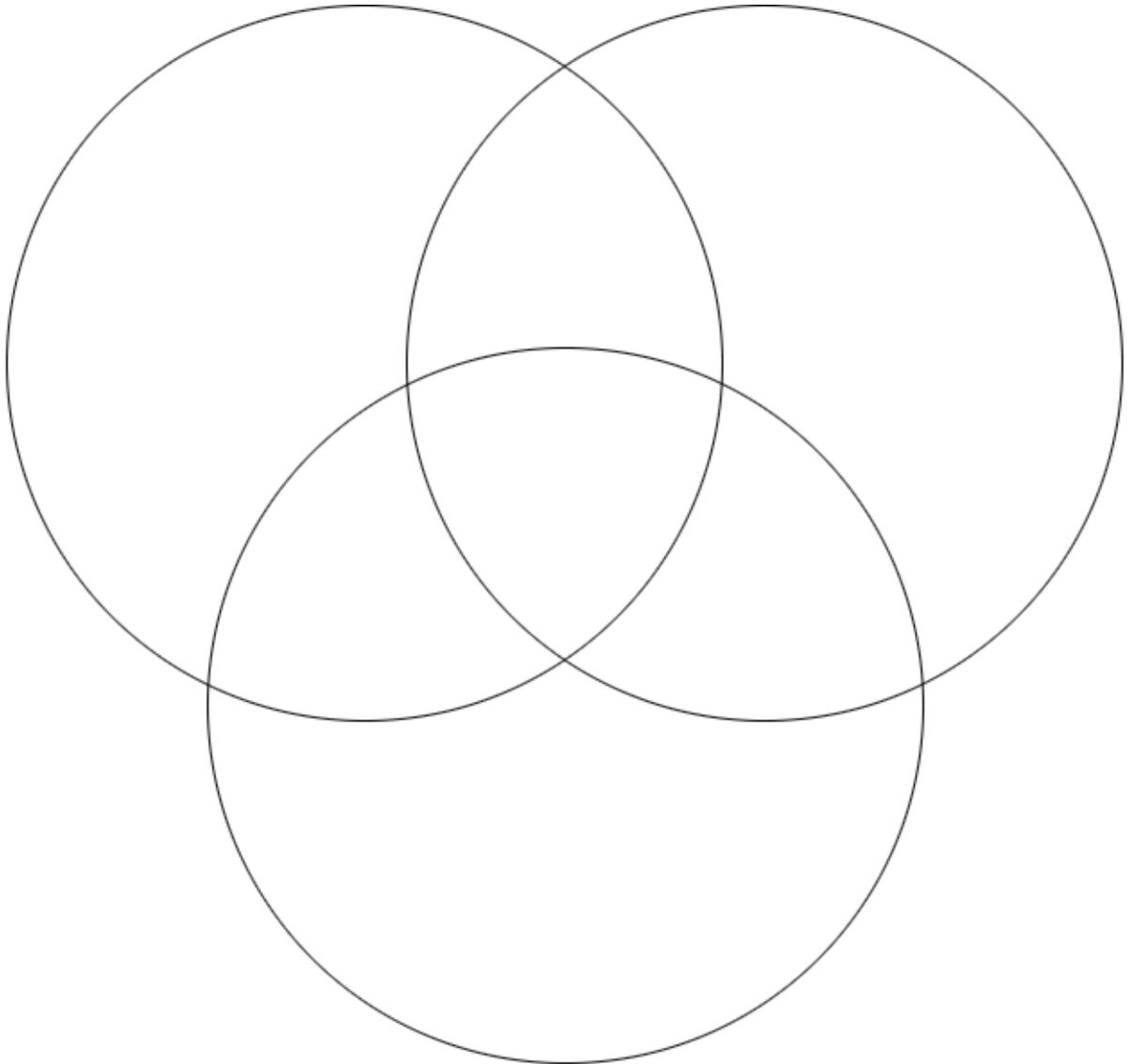


Figure 3 Blank Venn Diagram

4. **LISTING:** This method is like writing a shopping list of phrases and ideas. On your paper, write down any thought or feeling that comes to mind about a particular topic. This is similar to freewriting in that you should not censor yourself or worry about grammar – just write! This process will help you get all of those mixed up thoughts in your head down on paper, so you can sift through

them afterwards. Here is an example of a list on the topic “How I felt when I failed my midterm:”

- was disappointed
- felt defeated
- inspired to do better next time
- embarrassed to tell anybody
- wanted to blame the teacher
- got teased by my brother, the A student
- afraid I would not pass the class
- went to The Writing Center for extra help

Once you are done, go through the list and choose the ideas that work for you, crossing off the ideas that do not. You can also continue to write ideas down as you go through this process. When you think you are done, number the ideas that are left in the order you think they should appear in your draft. [This will give you an informal outline that will help in the next step of the writing process: drafting.]

(For more information on creating a formal outline, see The Writing Center Handout on *Outlining*)

5. **BRAINSTORMING:** Ask yourself questions about your topic. *Who, what, when, where, why and how* are good questions to start with.

Whose fault is the F?
What happened exactly?
When did I stop studying? Why did I stop studying?
Where can I go from here?
Why do I think the teacher gave me an F?
How can I improve my grade?

These questions will be helpful in your drafting stage if you are stuck trying to find more to write about. If you are trying to expand your essay, but you are unable to come up with another important topic to discuss, consider asking yourself questions like these to generate more ideas.



Figure 4 Letter Cube

6. **CUBING**: If you are having trouble describing a topic or idea, a helpful prewriting tool is cubing. This strategy will help you acknowledge and be able to describe different sides of an idea. Cubing is a great prewriting tool for more developed and extensive essays. The following steps will explain each step of the cubing process.

- Think of your subject as a cube. A cube has six sides. In this exercise, every side is a different way to look at your subject. Try making a cube.
- Look at one of the object's sides, and try to write about how your topic **compares and contrasts** to something in your life. You can also make a diagram.
- Turn the object so that you are now observing a different side of it. Now, **associate** your topic with something. This could be a similar idea or topic.
- Turn the object again, but this time, **analyze** your topic. What are the essential features or aspects of it? Is it useful? How would this topic be beneficial or detrimental?
- When you turn your object to the next side, discuss how your idea can be **used**. Can you apply it to everyday life? Can it be used by many people or even often?
- Lastly, turn your object again, and decide whether **you are for it or against it**. Once you make a decision, list your reasoning based on all of the previous information you have collected during the exercise.

Now that you have applied this thinking exercise to a topic, you can apply it to any other idea. Think about your topic, and list different ideas or points that stand out to you. You may even try to time yourself while observing each side. The more you practice this technique, the faster your ideas will come to you.

EXAMPLE:

Topic: What are the Benefits of Driving Hybrid Cars?

- We can look at one “side” of this topic by comparing and contrasting hybrid cars to something in your life. You may spend much money on gasoline, while people who drive hybrid cars spend a great deal less.
- Now that we’ve identified one “side” of this topic, we can associate it with something similar. For example, since hybrid cars eliminate a large amount of pollution, we can assume that this topic is similar to the idea of recycling or practicing other ecological habits, such as saving water.
- The next ‘side” of this topic requires us to analyze it. We can gather essential information about hybrid cars by doing research or using what we already know. Hybrid cars would be very beneficial because they require little gasoline in order to run, they prevent thousands of pounds of pollution each year, driving these cars save many wildlife habitats, etc.
- While observing the following “side,” we know that hybrid cars can be widely used by billions of people every day. Because they are so economically smart, they would save the average American thousands of dollars a year on gasoline costs.
- The final “side” of this topic requires you to make a decision as to whether you are for or against your topic. In this case, we are discussing driving hybrid cars. Based on the information given, you will make your decision.

This approaches your subject from six different perspectives and can be very thorough. Use this method if you need to come up with a more developed paper.

Cubing Exercise:

- a. Choose a topic. (issue, person, idea, event, problem, person, object, scene)
- b. Write it at the top of your page to help you keep it firmly in mind.
- c. Give yourself three to five minutes to write from each of the perspectives listed below.

*Start from what you know, but do not limit yourself: this is all part of the discovery process. This way you can identify those areas that will need further thought or research and speculate about where you will discover this information.

*Try to keep your momentum going; that is, keep going until you have written about your topic from all six perspectives. As in [freewriting](#), it is important to reread what you have written. Look for surprises, unexpected insight, and momentum.

1. *Describing*: Physically describe your topic. What does it look like? What color, shape, texture, size is it? Identify its parts.
2. *Comparing*: How is your topic similar to other topics/things? How is it different?
3. *Associating*: What other topic/thing does your topic make you think of? Can you compare it to anything else in your experience? Don't be afraid to be creative here: include everything that comes to mind.
4. *Analyzing*: Look at your topic's components. How are these parts related? How is it put together? Where did it come from? Where is it going?
5. *Applying*: What can you do with your topic? What uses does it have?
6. *Arguing*: What arguments can you make for or against your topic? For example,
 - Pros: Cubing is an excellent tool for rapidly exploring a topic. It reveals quickly what you know and what you don't know, and it may alert you to decide to narrow or expand your topic.
 - Cons: Cubing asks us to examine a topic in an unusual way and this may prove frustrating to some writers. It may feel awkward at first to describe something like abortion and this may cause a writer to abandon this technique or, worse, the topic itself.

Remember, whenever you feel like you are drawing a blank and are out of ideas, pretend your writing is a three-dimensional object; look at each side of it, and write whatever comes to mind. This will be a great help to you when you run out of ideas.

Exercise:

Pick a topic of your own or one that your instructor has given you, and, for that topic, choose two of the four pre-writing techniques to practice. Each pre-write should be at least a page in length.

This handout is based on the following text:

Duckhart, Tracy. "Prewriting: Cubing". 20 August 2007. Web. 1 March 2013

Fine Clouse, Barbara. Working it Out: A Troubleshooting Guide for Writers. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

"Getting Started: Points to Ponder". grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/brainstorm.htm. n.d. Web. 1 March 2013.

Hagy, Jessica. [Thisisindexed.com](http://thisisindexed.com). 4 December 2010. Web. 1 March 2013.

For further reference, see the following books:

McDonald, Stephen, and William Salomone. In Brief: A Handbook for Writers. Belmont/Wadsworth, 2000. 3-34.

Reid, Stephen. The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992. 2-43.

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