

Note: these heuristics, although not intended as formulae for organizing papers, can to some extent function in this way. They are primarily “thinking moves” designed to produce better, more in-depth thinking for essays, arguments or reports. The best way to learn these thinking skills is to practice them out repeatedly in your own work and with other writers.

I. PASSAGE-BASED FOCUSED FREEWRITING

WHAT IT DOES

- Find an interesting passage
- Sketch its context
- Target and paraphrase key words and phrases
- Explore why (so what that) the passage is interesting
- Draw out implications
- Ask how the passage is representative of the larger reading

WHAT IT DOES NOT DO

- Voice reactions and criticisms
- Free-associate with other subjects

Passage-based focused freewriting increases your ability to learn from what you read. The passage-based version differs from regular freewriting by limiting the focus to a piece of text. It prompts in-depth analysis of a representative example, on the assumption that you’ll attain a better appreciation of the whole after you’ve explored how a piece of it works. (*Please review the short take from Chapter 1, Freewriting: How and Why to Do It.*)

The impromptu nature of passage-based focused freewriting encourages you to take chances, to think out loud on the page. It invites you to notice what you notice in the moment and take some stabs at what the passage might mean without having to worry about formulating a weighty thesis statement or maintaining consistency. It allows you to worry less about what you don’t understand and instead start to work things out as you write.

A lot of great papers start as in-class writings—not as outlines.

Step 1: Choose a limited piece of concrete evidence to focus on and write about it without stopping for 10 to 20 minutes. Pick a passage you find interesting and that you probably don’t quite understand. Copy out the passage at the beginning of your freewrite. This act will encourage attention to the words and induce you to notice more about the particular features of your chosen passage.

Step 2: Contextualize the evidence. Where does the passage come from in the text? Of what larger discussion is it a part? Briefly answering these questions will prevent you from taking things out of context.

Step 3: Focus on what the text is inviting you to think—its point of view—not on what you think, your point of view of that subject.

Step 4: Make observations about the evidence. Stay close to the data you’ve quoted, paraphrasing key phrases in the passage and teasing out the possible meanings of these words. Then reflect on what you’ve come to better understand through paraphrasing.

Step 5: Share your reasoning about what the evidence means. As you move from observation to implication, remember that you need to explain how the data mean what you claim they mean.

Step 6: Address how the passage is representative, how it connects to broader issues in the reading. Move from your analysis of local details to consider what the work as a whole may plausibly be “saying” about this or that issue or question. It’s okay to work with the details for almost the entire time and then press yourself to an interpretive leap with the prompt, “I’m almost out of time but my big point is. . .”

Discussion Passage-based focused freewriting is probably the single best way to arrive at ideas about what you are reading. The more you practice it, the better you will get—the easier you will find things to say about your chosen passage. Ask yourself:

- “What one passage in the reading do you think most needs to be discussed—is most useful and interesting for understanding the material?”
- “What one passage seems puzzling, difficult to pin down, anomalous, or even just unclear—and how might this be explained?”

The best passage-based focused freewrites usually do one or more of the following:

- **Interpretation**, which moves from restatement to what the sentence from the text means.
- **Implication**. A useful (and logical) next step is to go after implication. If X or Y is true, then what might follow from it? (Or “So what?”)
- **Application**. A passage that is resonant in some way for the reader might lead him or her to write about some practical way of applying the reading—for example, as a lens for understanding other material (*see Chapter 5, Writing About Reading*).
- **Assumptions**. We lay out implications by moving forward (so to speak). We unearth assumptions by moving backward. If a text asks us to believe X, what else must it already believe? From what unstated assumptions, in other words, would X follow?
- **Queries**. What questions, interpretive difficulties, and struggles are raised by the reading?

As the short take *Freewriting: How and Why to Do It* in Chapter 1 discusses, passage-based focused freewriting incorporates a number of the methods introduced in the opening chapters. So, for example:

- it often starts with observations discovered by doing Notice and Focus;
- it grows out of doing The Method, further developing the paragraph that explains why you chose one repetition, strand or binary as most important;
- in analyzing the chosen passage, writers normally paraphrase key words; and
- they keep the writing going by insistently asking “So what?” at the ends of paragraphs.