



All-Purpose Invention Strategies: Writing

By Karl Schnapp

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking and pre-writing. You can use several pre-writing strategies to help you recall details of scenes or people, recollect ideas and facts, discover connections in new information you've collected. Unlike most mapping strategies, writing strategies invite you to produce text, words, complete sentences. Sentences have more "generative" power than single words and phrases because they compel you to explore ideas and define relationship, to bring together or show how they are different, to identify causes and effects. Some pre-writing strategies are guided, systematic techniques, while others are more flexible. Here you will learn about four ways of using writing for invention and inquiry: speed writing and looping.

Speed Writing

Speed writing (often called "freewriting" and "forced writing") is an effective method of discovering what you already know about a subject. It is, therefore, best used when you already know your subject well, and when you don't have much time for invention and revision, as in an essay test situation.

Speed writing entails sitting down and writing anything about your topic, in the order that it comes out of your brain. You should not edit or censor as you write. Just write without stopping, no matter how silly or off-topic some of the material may seem. Speed writing is often called "forced writing" when done under time constraints.

It takes considerable practice to speed write effectively. It requires you to shut off that part of your brain that demands order and correctness and neatness. And speed writing requires you to use the creative part of your brain. When you speed write, the goal is to write as much as you can, as quickly as you can.

You specify a length of time and write about your subject without looking back or stopping to think about what you've said. When you get stuck or run out of things to say, you write that until something else comes to you.

Looping

Looping is a writing strategy often used in combination with and as a follow up to speed writing. While speed writing involves going straight ahead at high speed, looping repeatedly returns to a starting point and begins again. No matter how general or unfocused your starting point, looping enables you to find a center of interest and eventually a "thesis."

The steps are fairly simple:

- Write down your area of interest. It may be a person, a place or thing, a trend or activity, a movie or cultural artifact, a broad historical period or a specific political event.
- Write nonstop for ten minutes. Start with the first thing that comes to mind about your topic. Write rapidly, without looking back to reread what you've written or to correct anything. Do not stop writing. If you get stuck, rewrite your last sentence. Keep writing. Follow diversions and digressions, but keep returning to your topic.

- At the end of ten minutes, pause and reread what you've produced. Decide what is most important--a single insight, a pattern of ideas, an emerging theme, a visual detail--the single thing about your topic that stands out most. (Some writers call this the "center of gravity.") To complete the first loop, express that "center" in a single sentence.
- Beginning with this sentence, write nonstop for ten minutes.
- Reread this second writing, locate the center, and summarize it in a single sentence again to complete the second loop.
- Keep looping until one of your center summaries produces a focus or thesis. You may need only two or three loops; you may need more.