

# Essay Writing 101

## Unit One: The Writing Process

### Lesson Two

In this lesson, we will learn what may be the most important part of the writing process—the planning, or prewriting, process. Why is planning important? Why not just start writing and see where it leads? How much planning is necessary? Well, let's think about those two points for a minute.

Why not just start writing? Actually, free writing can be part of the process, but free writing without some sort of plan may lead to an unorganized paper. I will discuss free writing later on in this lesson.

How much planning is necessary? The answer is as much as you feel comfortable with. Perhaps you need enough planning to know what your main points are. Or maybe you need so much structure that you need a detailed outline.

The planning process begins with choosing a topic. The best topics will, of course, come from your own interests. Are you familiar with the topic? Do you enjoy doing it or reading about it? Is the topic something you're not familiar with but want to learn more about? Is the topic a personal experience you want to share? If you don't find the topic enjoyable or at least interesting, you will not enjoy the writing process and will not produce your best work.

One way to choose a topic is to make a list of those people, events, or experiences you would like to write about. Another way is to write down the first five nouns and verbs that you can think of. What ideas do those words give you?

After you have chosen a topic (or two), you will need to narrow it down. Why is this important? Why can't you just start writing? Several years ago, I taught English in a small Christian school. When it came time to write essays or term papers, each and every one of my students had the same problem—none of them knew how to narrow down their topics. One student wanted to write about George Washington from the cradle to grave. Another, a diabetic, wanted to write everything she knew about diabetes. I also had a horse lover, a future meteorologist, and a future volcanologist (scientist who studies volcanoes) among my students. Those students who did not narrow down their topics gave me a lot of facts crammed into a short paper but didn't really tell me anything. Those students who took the time to narrow their topics gave me much better papers. How did I help my students narrow their topics and write better papers?

One method is by making a list. Begin with your broad topic and then make a list of everything you can think of about that topic. As an example, here is a list for the topic "hurricanes."

## Hurricanes

Definition of a hurricane

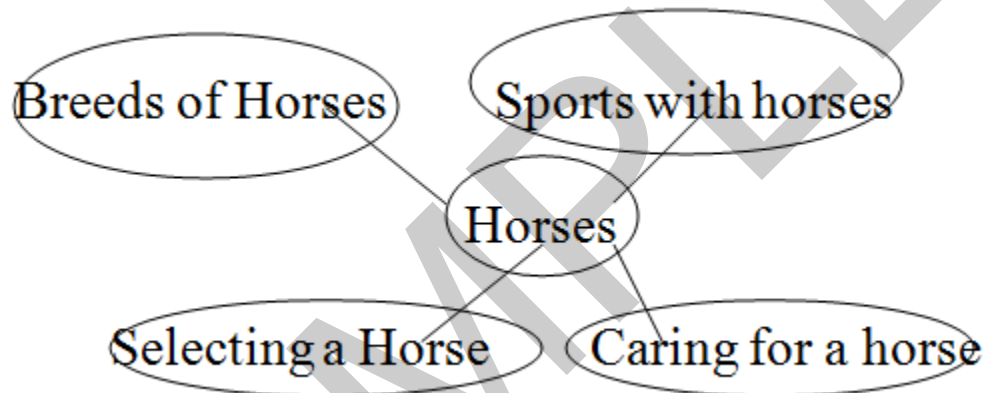
What causes hurricanes

Difference between hurricane and tropical storm

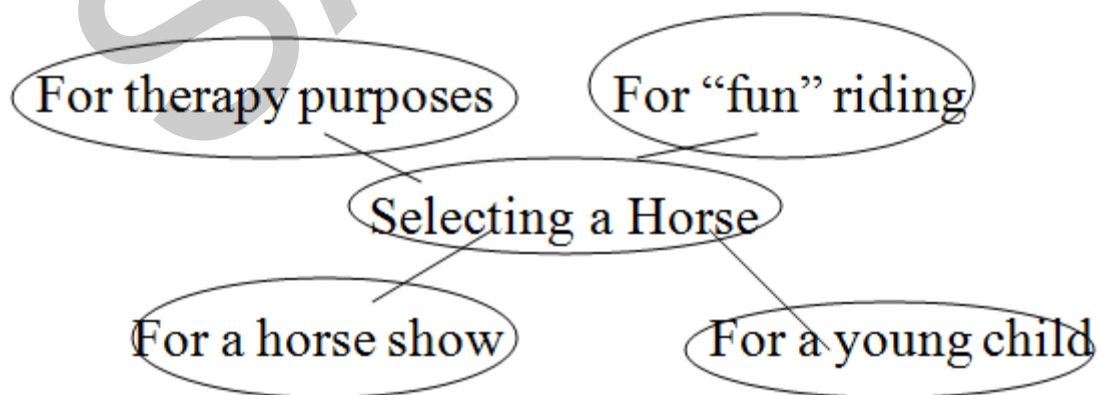
How hurricane names are chosen

The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast

A second method is what I call "webbing." Some of you may know it as "clustering." To begin, write a general topic in the middle of a sheet of paper, chalkboard, or marker board. Circle it. Then begin the brainstorming process, but write your ideas in more or less of a circle around your broad topic. Circle each subtopic and draw a line from each subtopic to the broad topic. Here's an example of the first part of a word web for the topic "horses."



For the second part of the web, let's focus on "selecting a horse." It now becomes the middle. Think of why you are selecting a horse and write those reasons around your new topic.



Are you getting the idea? This section of the web is getting pretty specific; I would most likely tell my horse-loving student to choose one of these ideas and go for it. But what if you wanted to be more specific? Since the horse example is just about complete, let's switch to "hurricanes." My future meteorologist has webbed as far as "Hurricane Katrina." But that's still pretty broad. Here's another possible layer:



He needs to focus one more time if he wants to talk about "ten years later." Maybe he could interview someone who lived through it for that topic.

Another way of determining and narrowing a topic is by free writing. Set a timer for five minutes and write anything and everything you can think of about your topic until the timer goes off. Then use those ideas to get your topic.

Now that you have chosen your topic and narrowed it down to a manageable size, are you ready to write? Not yet. You need to consider two other points first.

Consider your audience. Think about who will be reading your essay. For the purposes of this course, your audience is most likely your family or other homeschoolers, if you are taking this class in a co-op setting. Why is this important? You would write differently if you were writing for yourself, your family, or those you are comfortable with than you would if you were writing for those you do not know or who may not share your values. How would your word choices and tone differ if you were writing a teen column for your local newspaper, for example? Or a letter to the editor? Or your testimony?

Determine your purpose. Is your purpose to entertain, inform, or persuade? Let's consider the papers you will be writing for this class. When you write your expository essay, will you be writing to entertain, inform, or persuade? (More than one answer could be possible, depending on your topic). How about when you write your biographical essay? Your descriptive essay? Your personal experience essay? Your eyewitness report? Your cause and effect essay? Knowing your purpose will help you with tone, word choice, staying on topic, and keeping your focus.

**Your assignment for this week:**

Using one or more of the methods described above, choose and narrow down two topics. Then, for each topic, think of one subtopic that will entertain, one that will inform, and one that will persuade. Keep the list. We may use it later. See you next week!

*Note to Parents:*

*Although this is a writing course and I will use the word "write" throughout, I am aware that some of you have children with learning disabilities and developmental delays that make the physical act of writing difficult, if not impossible. Some of you may have auditory learners. When I use the word "write," feel free to substitute whatever process works best for your children, whether it is dictating to someone else, making a recording to transcribe later, using a keyboard exclusively, using voice recognition software, or doing something else that I haven't thought of. You know the best way to help your children excel!*

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