

**Target Grade Level:** All levels

**Keys Concepts:** Writing Process, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing

I vividly remember the first essay, a literary response prompt about *The Miracle Worker*, I assigned as a new teacher. As a class, we'd both read and watched the play, discussed it extensively, and completed hands-on projects; I didn't think one small essay would be a problem. I blithely handed out the assignment, told my students to write, and collected their work on the due date. It was that simple- until I actually began to read their writing.

Years later, I can laugh at my new-teacher optimism. I assumed my students would automatically know how to write an essay. I had no idea I had to carefully prepare them to write and then guide them through the composition process. Now I know that what I do to support my students in the classroom hugely impacts the quality of the essay they turn in.

This holds true for students using MY Access!® as well. I often observe teachers new to MY Access!® making the same mistake I did as a rookie teacher- they march their students to the lab, ask them to write and then submit. Not surprisingly, they usually get mediocre essays back. Scores don't climb until teachers integrate MY Access!® into a carefully designed instructional unit that supports students as they write. This process begins by planning what students will do before they even touch the keyboard. Prewriting is a critical part of the writing process.

Teachers who use MY Access!® effectively incorporate the prewriting tools into an instructional plan that helps students:

1. Establish background knowledge necessary to completing the prompt
2. Gather ideas that may not initially occur to them
3. Make a plan to organize these ideas

This blog will focus on the first two steps of prewriting, and a later entry will discuss how to help students plan their writing.

### **Step 1: Background Knowledge**

Before assigning a prompt, a teacher needs to decide what background knowledge students require in order to understand what and why they are writing. I'm not referring only to the research and reading associated with the topic, but also to providing students instruction about writing in general.

**1. Defining the genre.** We often assume students know the difference between a persuasive essay and narrative writing. We quickly learn otherwise when we read an essay that is all summary or a narrative with no plot! Teachers have used the ["Writing Applications" handout](#) to define the various genres of writing and their characteristics. Additionally, several MY Access!® resources and tools are helpful for teaching about genre:

- In "My Writing Space," be sure students are familiar with the Word Bank. It can be found under the middle tab, "Reference." On the left side of the Word Bank is a tab, [Writer's Vocabulary](#). When students click here, they have access to a list of critical vocabulary words for narrative, persuasive, and informative writing.
- The [MY Access!® Narrative Outline](#) is useful when teaching students the features of an effective narrative. Students link to this outline in "My Writing Space" under the "Prewriting Tab" (but don't forget that all these tools can be printed from your teacher account under "Resources"). You can first use this outline as you are reading a professional narrative. Have students record setting, characters, plot conflict, etc. as they read so they can begin to understand how writers use these elements. Then, they can complete this outline again as prewriting for their own essay.
- [The MY Access!® Plotting a Narrative](#) graphic organizer, the basic "shark fin" narrative structure, is also useful. In the student account it is currently available in "Instructional Resources" under the "Prompt" tab.
- [The MY Access!® Persuasive Writing Guide](#), also found under Prewriting, asks students to identify the subject, audience, purpose, and voice of their piece. Discussing these features can help students understand how to write a successful persuasive essay.

**2. Attacking the prompt.** One of the costliest mistakes students make on high-stakes timed writing tests is that they don't read the prompt carefully and write an "off-topic" response. Students need to be taught how to read and dissect—or as I

like to say, “attack” the prompt. A great strategy for helping students successfully understand the prompt is to teach them that before writing or even thinking about writing, they need to make a quick [“Do/What” chart](#). What a writer must DO refers to what type of essay is being prompted. For example, a prompt may ask the writer to analyze, compare, or contrast. Once this is established, a writer can determine WHAT needs to be addressed in the essay. For example, in an analytical paper, a writer will separate their topic into parts and discuss, examine,

or interpret each part. [“Understanding Prompt Vocabulary or ‘DO’ Words”](#) will help students become familiar with typical prompt vocabulary. Encourage students to practice making Do/What charts as often as possible using [“Attacking the Prompt.”](#)

**3. Researching With iSEEK.** If students need to do prompt-specific research, iSEEK is an excellent search engine. iSEEK web results, unlike Google or Yahoo, are safe, filtered, and subject to rating by users, as well as reporting and blacklisting if necessary. In addition, iSEEK authoritative results are subject to human review by educators in multiple disciplines. iSEEK authoritative results have, in many cases, been hand-picked for their quality and alignment to state or national education standards. [iSEEK](#) can be linked directly from MY Access!® from both the student and teacher accounts.

### **Step 2: Gathering Ideas**

Once students have the necessary background information required to write their essay or story, they need to focus on what, exactly, they are going to write about. It is important to start broadly-allow students to work together to think of as many ideas as possible-and then narrow down. Here are a few strategies:

**1. Think, Pair (or group), Share.** I often start by having students generate lists or clusters about the topics they can write about specific to the prompt. For example, if the prompt asks students to write about a childhood memory, I ask them to:

- Individually write down as many memories as they can in 3-5 minutes. Upon completion, have student draw a line, separating their ideas from the blank space below.

- Gather in groups of four to share their memories. As they are listening, they must record below the line any new ideas the sharing triggered. I love to point out that the simple act of talking is a great way to generate ideas.
- Narrow the list by circling their top 2 or 3 ideas.
- Complete an 8-10-minute “quickwrite” about their top choice.

**2. Debate.** If students are writing a persuasive essay, it is fun to assign students to a “pro” and “con” group and then to have a class debate. They will discover ideas as they are forced to think about both sides.

**3. Gallery Walk.** Hang posters with leading questions related to the prompt around the classroom. Have students walk from poster to poster writing down their responses and discuss the ideas generated. [“Life in Twenty Years”](#) is a sample of gallery walk questions.

**4. General Graphic Organizers.** MY Access!® has several graphic organizers that students can use to generate ideas. Under “Prewrite” there is a [Venn Diagram](#), [KWL Chart](#) and [Cluster Web](#). All of these can be projected and filled out as a whole class, or students can complete them individually.

There are endless possibilities for helping students discover writing topics, and I hope that many of you leave comments sharing your ideas-especially if you have developed an engaging prewriting lesson for a specific prompt.

Students usually enjoy the brainstorming part of prewriting, but if instruction stops at this point, they are often unable to transfer the ideas they have gathered into a structured narrative or essay. The next blog will discuss how to bridge this gap by helping students organize their thoughts in order to plan their writing.

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