

Tips for Using Prewriting Strategies

Prewriting refers to all the preparatory activities that precede the first draft of a piece of written work. Although prewriting is a crucial stage for any writer, it is especially important for a second language learner. Prewriting not only helps learners generate ideas, it can also help them develop academic skills.

Some examples of effective prewriting activities are:

- **Analyzing a writing model.** Good, clear writing models, such as the ones at the beginning of each *Connect the Grammar to Writing* section in *Grammar Explorer*, provide opportunities for students to notice and analyze the organization of ideas and also to observe how key grammar structures are used naturally in context. When students study a model's content and grammar together, they learn that grammar is an important tool for written communication. They can also be asked to identify certain grammatical structures.

Having students complete charts or other kinds of graphic organizers is another effective way to get them to examine the content and grammar in the writing model. Doing this teaches them how to use different types of graphic organizers, which they can then use to organize their own writing.

GRAMMAR FOCUS

In the narrative in exercise **A**, the writer uses these verb forms:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Simple past | • to tell about the main event of the story (<i>About a year ago . . . I decided that . . .</i>) |
| Past perfect | • to discuss events that happened before the main story (<i>I had never run more than a mile . . .</i>) |
| Present perfect | • with <i>since</i> to tell about past events that continue to the present (<i>Since then, I have run in several races.</i>) |

- **Exchanging ideas.** Writing is most often an interactive activity. For example, we can write to inform our readers, persuade them, or argue a point of view. Effective writing usually elicits some reaction. Some people may have questions or comments, and some may agree or disagree with the ideas. Others might want to share a fresh perspective. Having students exchange ideas at the prewriting stage reminds them that they are not writing in a vacuum. One way to encourage interaction before students tackle a first draft is to have them share their topic ideas. Here is an example from *Grammar Explorer 3*:

In one class, the assignment was to write two or three paragraphs about a personal goal. Before writing, the students followed the instructions in Exercise 2A.

2 BEFORE YOU WRITE.

- A** Work with a partner. Make a list of goals that you have achieved. Discuss which goals would be the most interesting to write about.

Consider one of the conversations that took place.

A: *What are you going to write about?*

B: *I don't know yet.*

A: *Didn't you take an art class last year?*

B: *Yeah, it was great. I learned to draw.*

A: *Wow! That sounds hard. Why don't you write about that?*

B: *Great idea! Thanks.*

• **Brainstorming.** This type of activity gets students to list as many topic-related ideas as possible and then choose the ones to include in their writing assignment. For example, in this activity from *Grammar Explorer 3*, after students had decided on their personal goals (Exercise 2A, above), they were given five minutes to list all the associated words and ideas they could think of.

One student's brainstorm looked like this:

Learning to draw

Not very interested in art before

~~My aunt is an artist~~

Went to local art exhibit

Loved the drawings in black and white ink

Signed up for an art class

Bought art supplies—pencils, pens, eraser, sketchpad

Practiced sketching on weekends

Drew a picture of my cat... looks just like her!

~~Don't like oil painting~~

Tried watercolors

The student decided to exclude the ideas that were not as relevant for her topic. Brainstorming also helped her generate some of the vocabulary that would make her writing more detailed and interesting (e.g., drawings, eraser, sketchpad, watercolors, etc.)

Prewriting contributes to the development of second language writers in many valuable ways. Activities such as those outlined above that are included in the *Connect the Grammar to Writing* sections of *Grammar Explorer*, can motivate students and jumpstart

their writing. They can be a source of new ideas and help students clarify and organize their thoughts. They also enable students to learn and practice appropriate grammar and vocabulary. Above all, prewriting can bolster students' confidence by giving them some critical tools with which to approach a blank page.