

Write Your Life Story

Prewriting Techniques

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There is a self-portrait of Norman Rockwell above my desk. Seated on a wooden swivel chair, he faces an easel with a blank canvas. Think blank page and you'll know where this story is headed. In the upper left-hand corner of his easel is a watch and a square of red paper with DUE DATE in bold black letters. Sketches cascade from a bookcase to the floor. His palette of paints and brushes sit, unused, on the floor behind him. His right arm is raised to the back of his head. He is clearly lost trying to decide where and how to begin. Writers often have the same paralyzing experience, an experience that triggers the internal critic to taunt them with a constant barrage of doubt: *I can't do this, I'll never be able to do this, this is too hard, I have no ability to write, no talent for this.*

The Theme Roadmap and the Master List of Essential Stories support you in deciding where to begin and what to write next. Prewriting Techniques help you clarify what you want to say. In this lesson you'll discover how prewriting techniques such as Brainstorming, Clustering, and Freewriting

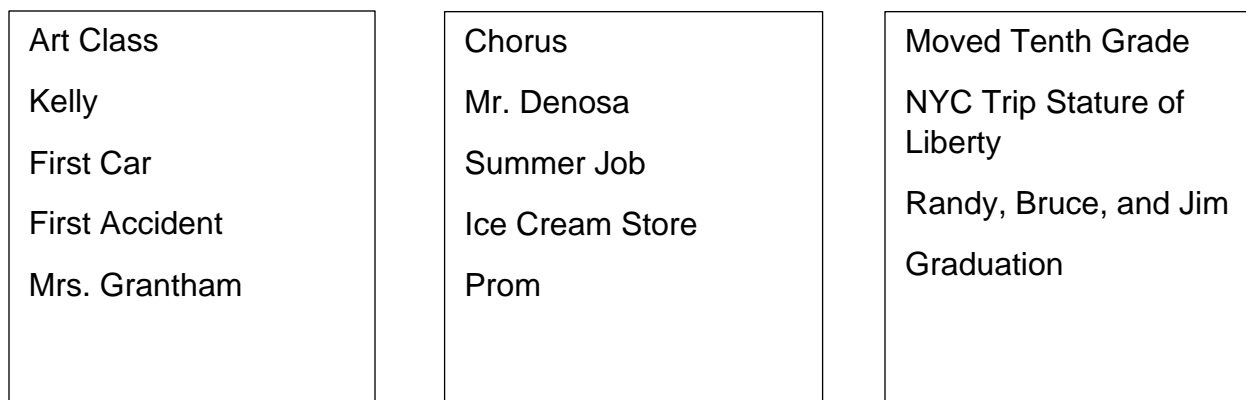
minimize or eliminate paralysis, doubt, and the taunts of the internal critic when you face a blank page.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a way of generating ideas about what you want to say in your story or theme. You begin by writing a phrase or sentence about what your theme or story is about. Next, list anything and everything that pops into your mind about this idea. Keep going until you're repeating the same ideas or your well of ideas runs dry.

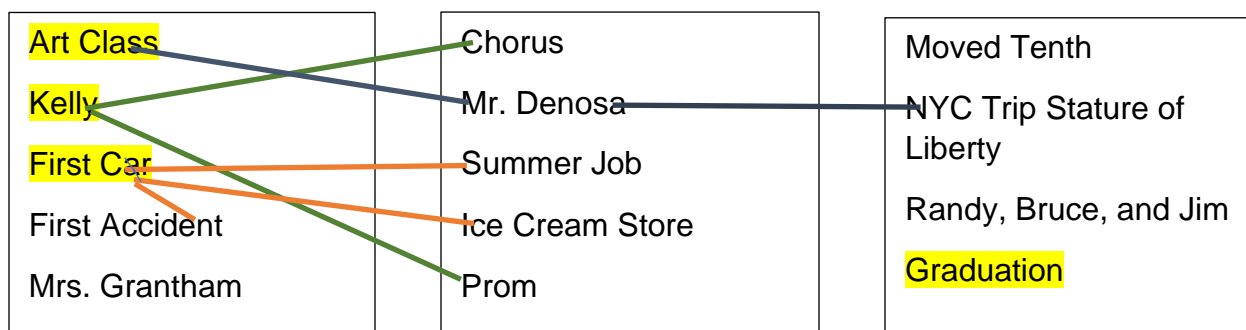
The key to brainstorming is to fire the internal critic and to suspend judgment. There are no right or wrong thoughts, feelings, images or ideas. You can evaluate items on the list later. At this stage of the writing process there is nothing at stake. This list is just for you. So, don't censor yourself. You might block a rich vein of memories.

Let's walk through an example of Brainstorming with a fictitious person named Tim Hancock. He might decide that high school was a major turning point in his life. Initially, he might not understand why he feels so strongly about high school as a turning point, so he generates a list of the people, places, events, images, thoughts, and feelings that come to mind:



Review the List for Patterns

Later he reviews the list looking for items that are related to form topics for his theme or story:



Tim notices connections between some of the items and realizes that they represent four separate stories related to his theme of high school as a turning point:

Art Class

Following the dark blue line, Tim connects his experiences in a required Art class. In this class, his teacher Mr. Denosa was so encouraging, he began to consider he was good at photography. When the class took a field trip to New York. Tim created photos that won an award.

Kelly

The green line traces Tim's relationship with Kelly. He met her in Chorus. They went to the prom together. She was the first girl he thought about marrying.

First Car

The orange line connects Tim's experiences with his first car. In eleventh grade, He decided to buy a car. He found a summer job. It was a great job with people his age who were fun at work and outside of work. It helped him buy his first car. But two months later, he had an accident. He was going too fast rounding a curve, lost control, and hit a tree. He wasn't hurt beyond bruises and cuts, but the car was totaled.

Graduation

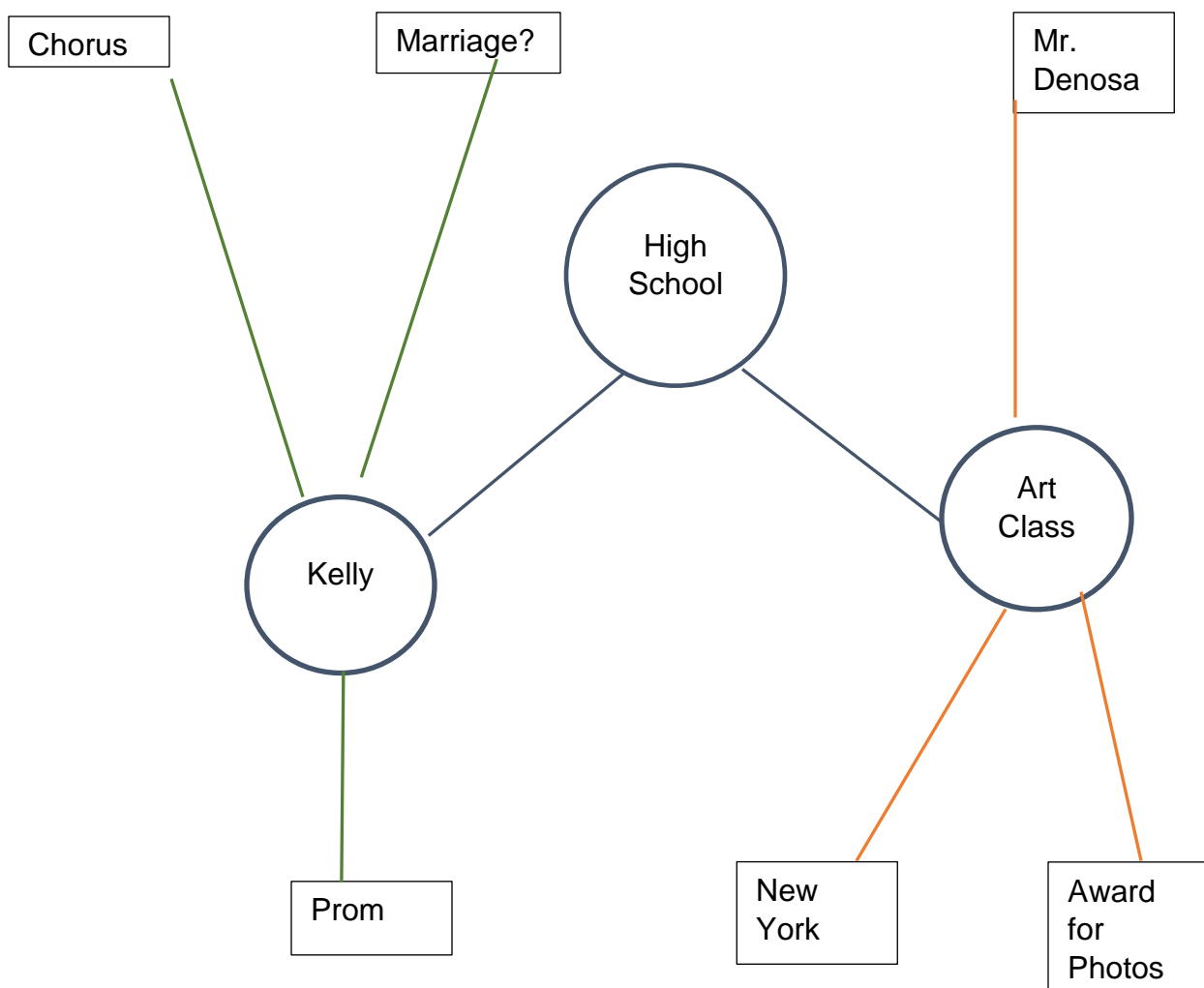
The day after graduation, Tim woke up in a cold sweat. He felt a wave of panic. He had been looking forward to working for a professional photographer that summer and while attending community college in the fall. Tim realized he was panicked because his friends were going away to college. He didn't know if they would maintain contact or if he would make new friends.

Reading what he had written about these four patterns, Tim realized that high School was the first major turning point in his life because he found something he was good at, earned the money for his first major purchase, met a girl he wanted to marry, and made long-term friends. Tim now has four stories he could write about. He could choose to incorporate all four of these stories into one piece or he could decide that he has the most interest and energy around his experiences with Mr. Denosa and Art Class and write his thoughts and feelings about those experiences.

Clustering

Instead of brainstorming (or in addition to brainstorming), Tim might choose a clustering technique. As he did for his brainstorming session, Tim reviews the questions related to the turning point theme and decides on a

topic—High School. He writes this topic in the center of a piece of paper, then underlines or circles it. Next, he draws a line from the circle and writes one thought about this topic. He then writes as many words around this thought as he can, drawing short lines to them to indicate their relationship to this idea.



By reviewing his diagram, Tim can write down a few sentences about the two major ideas above: Kelly and Art Class. As with brainstorming he can write about both topics or choose the one with the most interest and energy around it.

Writing the First Draft

Freewriting

Freewriting involves writing on a topic for ten to fifteen minutes without stopping. Don't worry about capitalization, punctuation, or spelling. Don't be concerned about neatness, order, or logic. Just keep writing. While freewriting, it's important not to evaluate the quality of your writing. Peter Elbow in his book *Writing without Teachers* states that:

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in your writing.

Use freewriting to let your voice emerge. This is what your family, friends, and others want to hear and remember.

In addition to banishing the judgmental, internal critic, as you freewrite, it's also important to ban your internal censor. Censoring often happens

when writers feel their writing has little value. Stick with it anyway. See where it will take you. You don't have to include it in the rough draft or the final draft.

Censoring also occurs when a story or theme is emotionally charged. In the article *Solutions to the Most Common Obstacles to Completing a Life Story*, we discussed writing difficult stories. Review that information and decide if the benefits of writing the story are worth the painful feelings that are an inevitable part of getting such stories on the page. Ask yourself if this is the right time to write the story and if the suggestions about writing the story are sufficient to enable you to complete the story. If not, just put the story aside for now and choose a new topic. You can come back to it later.

With the information generated by brainstorming and clustering, Tim is now ready to select a topic to write about for ten to fifteen minutes without worrying about capitalization, punctuation, or spelling. He has decided to combine the stories into one piece. He will sustain the writing until the timer rings. When he stalls, you will notice he repeats the line he wrote before, simply writing he doesn't know what else to write, or takes a new tangent with the first thing that comes to mind.

In elementary school and middle school my grades were "C" or below. I never thought I was good at anything. But in Art class, Mr. Denosa offered the option of creating art with photographs. My parents gave me a camera when I was nine. I loved taking pictures, but

it wasn't until Mr. Denosa started telling me why my pictures were good that I began to understand what I was doing and how I was doing it. I got better and better and then started wondering what else I was good at.

I wondered what else I was good at. I wondered what else I was good at. I was good at making Kelly laugh. I didn't know I had a sense of humor until I met her in chorus. She was fun and funny and that brought out the funny in me that had been there all along. I don't know what else to write about this. I don't know what I'm writing really. I suppose that I'm trying to write about how high school changed by life. I know that earning the money for the car made me feel more confident. Mr. Denosa, Kelly, and Randy, Bruce and Jim. They all helped me see things about myself I didn't know about. The week after graduation I panicked because everyone was moving away for college and I didn't know if I would find new friends like them. Didn't know if they would really stay in touch.

Reviewing what he had written, Tim highlighted and underlined thoughts or feelings that he was interested in and felt energized to write more about. The next day, he wrote a rough draft and began the revision process by answering a series of questions designed to help him decide if anything was missing, what might be unclear, and what might need to be eliminated. You'll find these questions in the next article, entitled *Revision*. After revising the content, Tim edited his theme for capitalization, punctuation, and grammar. Finally he printed a copy to share with family and friends.