

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Thinking Out Loud: The Prewriting Interview

*Helen H. Choi*

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## Thinking Out Loud: The Prewriting Interview

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### Overview

The overall intent of this activity is to support a prewriting phase for invention and creative thinking, as students search for and develop a topic and craft a plan for responding to a writing assignment (Trim and Isaac 107). While invention can be explored through individual activities such as freewriting, it can also take place during conversations where ideas are shared and sorted through (Esposito 42). By talking about their ideas and listening the perspectives of others, students can experience "spontaneous invention," as ideas may emerge as they engage in dialogue and provide and receive immediate feedback from others (Lessner and Craig 144). In this prewriting interview activity, students discuss assignment parameters, verbalize and try out various topic ideas, and begin to articulate their main ideas and perspectives with classmates. Such discussions can support the creation and evolution of ideas prior to the translation of talk to text and aid students in sorting through ideas as they hone in on topics for their writing assignments (Li and Zhang 2).

### Context

While this activity has been used by the author in the context of an undergraduate engineering writing course with many multi-lingual students, it can be easily applied to other secondary and postsecondary courses involving prewriting towards a major assignment. Like Lessner and Craig's "auditory/dialogic generative outlining" prewriting exercise, it relies on peer interaction and feedback during the invention phase (138-144). However, this activity is more structured, as enhanced guidance may be helpful to students who may not be particularly enthusiastic about writing or

may be multi-lingual English learners (Li and Zhang 15).

## Time Commitment

1 class session

## Materials

The instructor should distribute editable digital versions of interview questions or paper copies of the questions. Students can type or handwrite responses.

## Activity Process

- In preparation for this activity, students should consider a few general ideas about assignment topics before class. If students do not have topics in mind, they can be encouraged to choose an area of interest. The instructor may also provide sample topics that students can use as placeholders for this activity.
- Next, in pairs, students interview each other using an instructor-prepared list of questions and tasks. A sample interview form (student handout) is attached as an appendix and can be modified to reflect specific course content.
- The activity is highly structured and consists of 5 parts:
  1. discussion about the writing assignment to assist students with planning
  2. discussion of possible topic ideas
  3. a collaborative writing task
  4. examination of the textual translation of their discussion
  5. metacognitive reflection
- Students are encouraged to help each other complete the questions and tasks. Upon completion of the interviews, they will exchange their work so that each student can review the written record of their discussions.

- Finally, students will reflect on their experiences with the activity and may volunteer to share their reflections with the class.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of the invention phase of the prewriting process
- Understand invention and prewriting as social and collaborative
- Develop oral communication skills
- Evaluate other perspectives
- Generate topics and ideas for their own writing

## Learning Accommodations

- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and digital delivery.
- Students should have significant discretion in the selection of topics during the prewriting phase, as the focus of this activity is the invention process.
- Interviewers may choose to use an audio recording application on their smartphone or other device and send the recording to their peer.

## Works Cited

Esposito, Lauren. "Saying 'Yes, and' to Collaborative Prewriting: How Improvisational Theater Ignites Creativity and Discovery in Student Writing." *The English Journal*, vol. 105, no. 5, 2016, pp. 42–47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26606370>.

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Invention as Inquiry Based Learning in First Year Writing." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 1*, edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, Parlor Press, 2010, pp. 126-145.

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Trim, Michelle D., and Megan Lynn Isaac. "Reinventing Invention: Discovery and Investment in Writing." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing, Volume 1*, edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky, Parlor Press, 2010, pp. 107-125.

## Appendix: Prewriting Interview Activity

The purpose of this activity is to review our upcoming assignment and create and explore possible topics.

### *Instructions*

1. Select a partner. Designate one person as the interviewer and the other as interviewee and complete parts 1-3 below.
2. Switch roles and then complete parts 1-3 again.
3. Once both interviews have been conducted, exchange papers so that each person has a written record of their own responses and topic ideas.
4. Complete parts 4 and 5.
5. Ask your partner for help if you have questions during parts 1-5.

### *Part 1: Review the assignment prompt*

Interviewer: Ask your partner the following questions and write down their responses below.

- a. What is the assignment prompt? Who is the audience? What is the purpose of the writing task? What is the genre of the writing task?
- b. Which of the course readings, if any, will you use in your paper?
- c. Which of the research tools that we discussed in class will you be using for your paper?
- d. What are some general topic areas that you have in mind? Try to think of at least two. How are they related to the prompt?
- e. Are these topics of personal interest? If not, what topics are more interesting to you?
- f. [add prompt-specific information][Example: Is your topic about professional engineering ethics or it is a macroethics issue? Which of the analytical frameworks we discussed in class will you be applying?]

*Part 2: Think out loud*

Interviewer: Ask your partner to talk about their topic(s) for at least one minute and write down what they say below. If they need help filling the time, ask questions that help your partner narrow down their topic(s). Some sample questions are provided but feel free to ask your own. If your partner has more than one topic, repeat this process for each topic.

Topic 1: \_\_\_\_\_

- Why is this topic important to you?
- Why might others be interested in learning about your topic?
- What's the main comment or takeaway that you want to make about this topic?

Topic 2: \_\_\_\_\_

- Why is this topic important to you?
- Why might others be interested in learning about your topic?
- What's the main comment or takeaway that you want to make about this topic?

*Part 3: Co-draft a preliminary thesis*

Interviewer: Working with your partner and using the assignment prompt as a guide, co-write a preliminary thesis on a topic from part 2 here. If there is more than one topic, ask your partner which one they would like to pursue for this part of this activity.

*Part 4: Exchange written interviews*

Review your ideas, as documented by your interviewer. What do you think of your topic(s) now that you see it in writing? What do you think of the preliminary thesis that you and your partner drafted? How will you refine and build on it? Write your responses here.

*Part 5: Reflect on talking about writing*

Think about how verbalizing your ideas to a peer affected the way you created and shaped them. What types of feedback did you and your partner exchange? How did it feel to collaborate with someone on writing? Write down your reflections below. If you choose, share your reflections with the class.