

# Prewriting: Getting Students Started

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# Overview

- Why I started using prewriting exercises
- What is a prewriting exercise?
  - In theory
  - In practice
- What are prewriting exercises good for?
- Questions & discussion

The prewriting exercise is a tool with many potential functions.



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# Theoretical framework

- The historical precedent: *progymnasmata*
- The term “prewriting”
- Prewriting as part of the writing process
- Prewriting as a hybrid exercise
- Other connections?



# Practical information

- What does a prewriting exercise look like?
- Sample assignments
  - Lower-division
  - Upper-division
- Sample student responses

## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in a lower-division course

Assignment: Make an argument about which characteristics of knighthood Chrétien de Troyes portrays as most significant in *The Story of the Grail*.

1. Brainstorm a list of all of the characteristics of knighthood represented in *The Story of the Grail*. List as many as possible, even if some seem silly or unusual.
2. Choose the one characteristic from your list that seems to be the most significant and convincing. Mark it with a check and then find and copy a quote that you can analyze to support that interpretation.



## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in a lower-division course

3. Write a close reading of the quote you have chosen that analyzes *why* specific words/images are significant and *how* they support your argument. (You may find it useful to circle or highlight the words/images that strike you as most significant and then write a few sentences about each.)
4. Repeat steps 2-3 with a second characteristic from your list (or a second example of the same characteristic that shows it in a different light).



## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in a lower-division course

5. What connections do you see between the two characteristics or examples you have chosen? What overall argument can you imagine that would cover both of these characteristics/examples as well as any additional ones you would like to discuss in your essay?
6. Imagine that someone wanted to argue against your interpretation of the significant characteristics of knighthood. What would be their strongest argument against your interpretation? How would you respond to that argument in order to prove that your interpretation is stronger?





## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in a lower-division course

Hints on how to use this exercise: Your answer to #5 provides a rough draft of your argument; a revised version of this argument should appear in the first paragraph of your essay. Each time you perform steps 2-3, you should have the material for a rough draft of one body paragraph in your essay. You will need to revise, expand, and clarify this material to make sure it is well-organized and effective in the final draft.



## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in an upper-division course

Assignment: make an argument about gender or genre in Chaucer.

- Give the titles of the text(s) about which you will be writing.
- State the argument that you plan to make in your paper (1-3 sentences). Your argument should present a specific and original point about the texts that could be argued against.



## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in an upper-division course

- Copy four of the passages that you plan to analyze in order to prove your argument. If your paper considers two texts, you will want to find two pairs of quotes that respond to each other (with one quote from each text in each pair). Each paragraph of your final draft should be built around your close reading of one passage or two related passages; here, you are essentially planning several paragraphs of your final draft.

## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in an upper-division course

- For each passage, write a brief analysis. Each analysis should have two parts:
  1. Choose one word or phrase that seems particularly important for your interpretation and briefly explain why that word/phrase is significant and what it suggests (at least 2-3 sentences per passage).
  2. Briefly explain how the passage supports and develops your argument (at least 2-3 sentences per passage). Be very, very specific.



## Sample instructions from prewriting exercise in an upper-division course

- Using the Middle English Dictionary, look up at least one of the words that you chose in the previous step. Print or copy the definitions for this word and note whether Chaucer was the first to use it.
- Write a few sentences exploring why your interpretation is significant. How does this argument change how we read the text as a whole? How does it change our view of gender or genre in Chaucer?

The prewriting exercise helps students formulate ideas without “setting” them in draft form.



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# The warning label

NOTE: You are not restricted to using the material from your prewriting exercise in your draft of the paper; you may change, delete, or add material as you see fit.

1. The texts I have chosen to compare and contrast are the *House of Fame* and the *Book of the Duchess*.
2. Chaucer's Dream Visions use unclear guides for the narrators to give way to several meanings or readings of the text. The reader is often unclear on whose problem is the focus, the dreamer or the presumed guide. So what does that say about Chaucer's view of dreams? The *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame* use unclear guide figures as if to demonstrate the fluid, ambiguous nature of dreams. What we see in dreams may be unreliable, so what guide can we trust but ourselves? And then can we even trust ourselves?  
*Interesting! In the final draft you'll want to make the argument rather than asking the questions*



from place to place. Because the description of the eagle is a little vague, we only really get that the eagle is, "al newe of gold," and, "fethers bryghte," it feels like Chaucer doesn't want the eagle to be credible. Yes the eagle is golden, and yes he is like nothing the narrator has ever seen before; but he also appears out of nowhere, talks the narrators ear off, and is a character that contributes little to the development of the narrator besides being his own personal transportation. It is unclear from the moment the eagle is introduced whether he is actually the guide or if the eagle is really only present to advance the plot. This makes the eagle have uncertain motives leaving me feeling questionable about him and what kind of help he could offer the narrator.

*Yes - his appearance & character do seem at odds*

*On the other hand, this seems like the right moment for a guide to appear - so does Chaucer set up expectations that he then disappoints?*

**Third Quote:** the *Man of Law's Tale* ll. 220-227

By cause that ther was swich diversitee  
Bitwene hir bothe lawes, that they sayn  
They trowe that no "Cristen prince wolde fayn  
Wedden his child under oure lawe sweete  
That us was taught by Mahoun, oure prophete."  
And he answerde, "Rather than I lese  
Custance, I wol be cristned, doutelees.  
I moot been hires; I may noon oother chese.

**Analysis of third quote:**

- a. The phrase "our lawe sweete" gives a hint that the Muslim prince and his advisers still thought that their Islamic law was "sweete." In the Middle English Dictionary, one of the definitions of sweete is "spiritually pleasing or satisfying," also as a description of "God's word: fair, true." This seems to indicate that the prince's conversion was not heartfelt but rather simply a ploy to win Constance's father's favor. Another suggestion this could be the case occurs later in the text when Constance refers to Syria as a "Barbre [pagan] nacion" (ll. 281) and speculates rather depressingly on the heart condition of her husband-to-be: "Custance, that was with sorwe al overcome/... to be bounden under subjeccioun/ Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?" (ll. 264, 270-271). Thus it is evident that she had little faith in the genuineness of his conversion. Finally, the very fact that the Sultan is willing to deny his native faith and be christened in order to attain Constance is problematic, displaying a lack of commitment to any religion (much less Christianity) on his part. very nice
- b. This passage shows some of the thought process behind the Syrians' conversion and suggests a lack of dedication to the religion itself. If it is the case that the Sultan is merely putting on a show for Constance, she would be compromising by marrying a man who had not undergone heartfelt conversion. Additionally, the selection shows the adamancy of the Sultan's desire because he, "moot been hires" subtly reminding us that her virginity will be taken away by this union. good

+ this contrasts w/ his mother's dedication ✓

### Definitions:

“sweete”-- (a) Agreeable, delightful, pleasing; pleasurable; also *iron.* [quot. c1395 *CT.Mch.*]; also, spiritually pleasing or satisfying; of tears: joyous; also *impers.*, in phrases with inf.: **hit is** ~, it is pleasant (to do sth.), it is good (to do sth.); **me were sweter**, I would rather (do sth.); (b) of words, discourse, narrative, etc.: pleasant; persuasive; also, beguiling; of doctrine, God's word: fair, true; ~ **seminge**, appearing to be pleasant, beguiling; **honi** ~ **wordes** [see **honi-swete** adj.]; (c) of an occasion: auspicious, propitious; (d) of weather: pleasant, favorable; (e) of sleep: restful, sound; of dreams: untroubled. (*Chaucer was not the first one to use this word.*)

“lust”-- a) Desire, wish, will; a desire, a wish; (b) **after (at, to)** ~, according to (one's) wish, at (one's) pleasure; **ayenes** ~, against (someone's) wishes; contrary to desire, unwillingly; (c) physical desire, bodily appetite (*Chaucer was not the first to use this word.*)

**Significance:** An exploration of the powerful, secular, masculine figure could lend insight into stereotypes for men in hagiography. This kind of character is used repeatedly in the hagiographies, so it demands some attention. In my reading, the masculine character does two things: 1) he compromises the woman's very life, or jeopardizes her independence and value (arguably just as important as life) by threatening her virginity; 2) he asks the female to compromise her Christian commitment. Because both male characters are represented in at least a partially negative light, their behavior indicates something about the female's source of value.

Men and critics  
tend to treat  
these characters  
as just foils  
for the women.  
So your  
reconsideration  
has great  
merit



# What are prewriting exercise good for?

- Flexible intervention in the writing process
- Benefits for students
- Benefits for instructors



## Prewriting exercises can help students...

- Get started thinking and writing early
- Generate ideas and identify their arguments
- Rely on their own ideas
- Add nuance to their interpretations/positions
- Anticipate and counter other interpretations of the evidence
- Incorporate different elements or resources



## Prewriting exercises can help instructors...

- Get stronger and more thoughtful papers
- Clarify expectations and priorities for an assignment
- Give useful feedback efficiently



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Questions? Comments? Other examples?