

Pre-Writing Strategies for the HumBio Proposal

Freewriting

Freewriting can be an excellent way to get some starting ideas on paper. It can be particularly useful for writing the Declaration because it can help you find language for connections and pathways that may as yet be inchoate in your thinking. The basic process in freewriting is to start with a simple prompt, to set a strict time limit, and to write non-stop until the time is up, even if you have nothing to say, and without concern for grammar, spelling, relevance, or even quality of ideas. The goal is to think *through* writing, to get what is in your head onto the page without interference from internal censors—that is, by getting out of your head!

Here is a step-by-step process you can use as a 15-minute warm-up for working on your Declaration.

1. **First prompt:** Write down the title of your Area of Concentration, set your timer for two minutes, and write everything that comes into your mind about your Area of Concentration. (This could be about why it interests you, why you chose it over other potential ACs, why you named it as you did, what subfields you see it as encompassing... anything to get the ball rolling.)
2. Review what you just wrote, perhaps reading it out loud or getting a friend to read it to you. Look for any emerging patterns or turns of phrase that might be potential indicators of important themes or keywords for you.
3. **Second prompt:** Pick one of the classes that will make up your course of study. It would be good if you started with one that is clearly at the heart of your concentration. Re-read the course description from the bulletin. Set your timer for one minute and write, starting with the following question: *How does class X serve my Area of Concentration?*
4. Repeat step three for each of your proposed Depth courses and for your foundation courses as a group. If you are writing about an internship or capstone experience, you can include a one-minute free write on that, too.
5. **Review what you just wrote.** Sometimes people find this easier if they go through first and eliminate nonsense stuff they wrote when they hit a wall (stuff like “I can’t think of anything” “this is stupid” “why am I taking this class anyway?”). Again, here you are looking for patterns of thinking and keywords, language that you can draw from as you move into the phase of more formal writing. Ideally, you’ll also see connections or potential connections between the language you used to describe your AC and the language you used to talk about the classes. What important words or phrases that connect to your AC freewrite appear in several of class-based freewrites? These might point to connections between classes, ways of clustering them together in explaining your course of study. What important words or phrases appear only in one class? These might point to ways of framing a class’s unique contribution to your course of study. Also, what words and phrases show up a lot in writing about the classes that *didn’t* appear in the freewrite about the AC? These might suggest ways in which you can further develop your thinking about your AC.

Concept Mapping

Concept Mapping offers you a more visual way of generating language for connecting the various aspects of your course of study together. You can do this freehand with a piece of paper or you can use a concept mapping application, such as Gliffy (<http://www.gliffy.com/>). The process is simple:

1. Start your map by drawing a box in the center of the page and writing the name of your Area of Concentration in it.
2. Then, write all the names of your courses in separate circles surrounding that initial box. (Alternatively, you could spread out the AC courses below the box and put the Foundation courses above the box.)

3. Draw arrows from each of the circled courses to the central box.

4. For each arrow, write a phrase, or a series of phrases, explaining the link between the class and your AC. For Breadth courses you might specifically focus on the “foundational” quality that links the two (i.e. how your Breadth courses build a broad platform of knowledge relevant to your AC topic and Depth courses). **These phrases will contain themes and keywords that will help you to define your AC more concretely in the second paragraph, to write paragraphs about your course of study, and to distinguish the special nature of the Breadth courses’ contribution to your course of study.**

5. Looking at what you have written, start drawing arrows between classes that seem connected.

6. For each of these new arrows, write a phrase, or a series of phrases, explaining how the classes relate to each other. This step may inspire you to start moving classes around so that it is easier for you to see connections. **These phrases will contain themes and keywords that will help you organize your paragraphs into sections or to present a more synthesized discussion of multiple courses in one paragraph.**

7. Now, for each of the arrows you drew in Step Six, write a phrase or two indicating a key difference between the two classes. **These phrases will give you some language for explaining in a more nuanced way how similar courses will contribute in distinct ways to your AC. The language you use here will be useful in constructing transitions between paragraphs (in the one class per paragraph model) or between sentences (in the multi-course per paragraph synthesis model).**

At this point you could be ready to start drafting. However, if you want to engage in some higher level conceptual mapping you might want to elaborate your conceptual map by giving some special consideration to borderline cases.

8. Are there classes in your map that didn’t have any arrows to other classes? Or that seemed like a bit of a stretch when you considered them in relation to your AC? In considering these cases, write some phrases that indicate why you decided to include this class despite its less tangible connection to your AC. **This language might help you frame your discussion of this class and/or encourage you to revisit your thinking about your AC to define it a way that expresses more fully your interest in the dimension of your field represented by this particular class.**

9. Are there classes that you almost included in your course of study but ultimately decided to exclude? Draw a circle around your existing conceptual map and place these classes outside it. Then, write some phrases that indicate why these classes didn’t make the cut. **In describing these negative cases, you may find that you are able to define with more precision some qualities that characterize the things that did make it into the circle. That language can help you with your paragraph two description of the AC and with your course by course discussions.**

Talking it Out

For some, the back and forth of dialog can be the most generative process for arriving at good, clear articulations. If this is you, you can adapt either of the two brainstorming methods described above for a conversation. Ideally, you would pair up with another person going through the process of drafting a declaration proposal and each take a turn working your way through the prompts. As a speaker, your job is simply to get your thoughts into words, taking notes when you hit upon articulations that you like or questions that seem to be holding you up. As a listener, it is your job to let the speaker know when you are confused or not convinced, asking questions and that indicate the source of your confusion and help the speaker push toward more concrete and compelling expression.