

Brainstorming

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What this handout is about

This handout discusses techniques that will help you start writing a paper and continue writing through the challenges of the revising process. Brainstorming can help you choose a topic, develop an approach to a topic, or deepen your understanding of the topic's potential.

Introduction

If you consciously take advantage of your natural thinking processes by gathering your brain's energies into a "storm," you can transform these energies into written words or diagrams that will lead to lively, vibrant writing. Below you will find a brief discussion of what brainstorming is, why you might brainstorm, and suggestions for how you might brainstorm.

Whether you are starting with too much information or not enough, brainstorming can help you to put a new writing task in motion or revive a project that hasn't reached completion. Let's take a look at each case:

When you've got nothing: You might need a storm to approach when you feel "blank" about the topic, devoid of inspiration, full of anxiety about the topic, or just too tired to craft an orderly outline. In this case, brainstorming stirs up the dust, whips some air into our stilled pools of thought, and gets the breeze of inspiration moving again.

When you've got too much: There are times when you have too much chaos in your brain and need to bring in some conscious order. In this case, brainstorming forces the mental chaos and random thoughts to rain out onto the page, giving you some concrete words or schemas that you can then arrange according to their logical relations.

Brainstorming techniques

What follows are great ideas on how to brainstorm—ideas from professional writers, novice writers, people who would rather avoid writing, and people who spend a lot of time brainstorming about...well, how to brainstorm.

Try out several of these options and challenge yourself to vary the techniques you rely on; some techniques might suit a particular writer, academic discipline, or assignment better than others. If the technique you try first doesn't seem to help you, move right along and try some others.

Freewriting

When you freewrite, you let your thoughts flow as they will, putting pen to paper and writing down whatever comes into your mind. You don't judge the quality of what you write and you don't worry about style or any surface-level issues, like spelling, grammar, or punctuation. If you can't think of what to say, you write that down—really. The advantage of this technique is that you free up your internal critic and allow yourself to write things you might not write if you were being too self-conscious.

When you freewrite you can set a time limit ("I'll write for 15 minutes!") and even use a kitchen timer or alarm clock or you can set a space limit ("I'll write until I fill four full notebook pages, no matter what tries to interrupt me!") and just write until you reach that goal. You might do this on the computer or on paper, and you can even try it with your eyes shut or the monitor off, which encourages speed and freedom of thought.

The crucial point is that you keep on writing even if you believe you are saying nothing. Word must follow word, no matter the relevance. Your freewriting might even look like this:

"This paper is supposed to be on the politics of tobacco production but even though I went to all the lectures and read the book I can't think of what to say and I've felt this way for four minutes now and I have 11 minutes left and I wonder if I'll keep thinking nothing during every minute but I'm not sure if it matters that I am babbling and I don't know what else to say about this topic and it is rainy today and I never noticed the number of cracks in that wall before and those cracks remind me of the walls in my grandfather's study and he smoked and he farmed and I wonder why he didn't farm tobacco..."

When you're done with your set number of minutes or have reached your page goal, read back over the text. Yes, there will be a lot of filler and unusable thoughts but there also will be little gems, discoveries, and insights. When you find these gems, highlight them or cut and paste them into your draft or onto an "ideas" sheet so you can use them in your paper. Even if you don't find any diamonds in there, you will have either quieted some of the noisy chaos or greased the writing gears so that you can now face the assigned paper topic.

Break down the topic into levels

Once you have a course assignment in front of you, you might brainstorm:

- *the general topic*, like "The relationship between tropical fruits and colonial powers"
- *a specific subtopic or required question*, like "How did the availability of multiple tropical fruits influence competition amongst colonial powers trading from the larger Caribbean islands during the 19th century?"
- *a single term or phrase that you sense you're overusing in the paper*. For example: If you see that you've written "increased the competition" about a dozen times in your "tropical fruits" paper, you could brainstorm variations on the phrase itself or on each of the main terms: "increased" and "competition."

Listing/bulleting

In this technique you jot down lists of words or phrases under a particular topic. Try this one by basing your list either

- on the general topic
- on one or more words from your particular thesis claim, or
- on a word or idea that is the complete opposite of your original word or idea.

For example, if your general assignment is to write about the changes in inventions over time, and your specific thesis claims that “the 20th century presented a large number of inventions to advance US society by improving upon the status of 19th-century society,” you could brainstorm two different lists to ensure you are covering the topic thoroughly and that your thesis will be easy to prove.

The first list might be based on your thesis; you would jot down as many 20th-century inventions as you could, as long as you know of their positive effects on society. The second list might be based on the opposite claim and you would instead jot down inventions that you associate with a decline in that society’s quality. You could do the same two lists for 19th-century inventions and then compare the evidence from all four lists.

Using multiple lists will help you to gather more perspective on the topic and ensure that, sure enough, your thesis is solid as a rock, or, ...uh oh, your thesis is full of holes and you’d better alter your claim to one you can prove.

3 perspectives

Looking at something from different perspectives helps you see it more completely—or at least in a completely different way, sort of like laying on the floor makes your desk look very different to you. To use this strategy, answer the questions for **each** of the three perspectives, then look for interesting relationships or mismatches you can explore.

1. Describe it: Describe your subject in detail. What is your topic? What are its components? What are its interesting and distinguishing features? What are its puzzles? Distinguish your subject from those that are similar to it. How is your subject unlike others?
2. Trace it: What is the history of your subject? How has it changed over time? Why? What are the significant events that have influenced your subject?
3. Map it: What is your subject related to? What is it influenced by? How? What does it influence? How? Who has a stake in your topic? Why? What fields do you draw on for the study of your subject? Why? How has your subject been approached by others? How is their work related to yours?

Cubing

Cubing enables you to consider your topic from six different directions; just as a cube is six-sided, your cubing brainstorming will result in six “sides” or approaches to the topic. Take a

sheet of paper, consider your topic, and respond to these six commands.

1. Describe it.
2. Compare it.
3. Associate it.
4. Analyze it.
5. Apply it.
6. Argue for and against it.

Look over what you've written. Do any of the responses suggest anything new about your topic? What interactions do you notice among the "sides"? That is, do you see patterns repeating, or a theme emerging that you could use to approach the topic or draft a thesis? Does one side seem particularly fruitful in getting your brain moving? Could that one side help you draft your thesis statement? Use this technique in a way that serves your topic. It should, at least, give you a broader awareness of the topic's complexities, if not a sharper focus on what you will do with it.

Similes

In this technique, complete the following sentence:

_____ is/was/are/were like _____.

In the first blank put one of the terms or concepts your paper centers on. Then try to brainstorm as many answers as possible for the second blank, writing them down as you come up with them.

After you have produced a list of options, look over your ideas. What kinds of ideas come forward? What patterns or associations do you find?

Clustering/mapping/webbing:

The general idea:

This technique has three (or more) different names, according to how you describe the activity itself or what the end product looks like. In short, you will write a lot of different terms and phrases onto a sheet of paper in a random fashion and later go back to link the words together into a sort of "map" or "web" that forms groups from the separate parts. Allow yourself to start with chaos. After the chaos subsides, you will be able to create some order out of it.

To really let yourself go in this brainstorming technique, use a large piece of paper or tape two pieces together. You could also use a blackboard if you are working with a group of people. This big vertical space allows all members room to "storm" at the same time, but you might have to copy down the results onto paper later. If you don't have big paper at the moment, don't worry. You can do this on an 8 ½ by 11 as well.

How to do it:

1. Take your sheet(s) of paper and write your main topic in the center, using a word or two or three.
2. Moving out from the center and filling in the open space any way you are driven to fill it, start to write down, fast, as many related concepts or terms as you can associate with the central topic. Jot them quickly, move into another space, jot some more down, move to another blank, and just keep moving around and jotting. If you run out of similar concepts, jot down opposites, jot down things that are only slightly related, or jot down your grandpa's name, but try to keep moving and associating. Don't worry about the (lack of) sense of what you write, for you can choose to keep or toss out these ideas when the activity is over.
3. Once the storm has subsided and you are faced with a hail of terms and phrases, you can start to cluster. Circle terms that seem related and then draw a line connecting the circles. Find some more and circle them and draw more lines to connect them with what you think is closely related. When you run out of terms that associate, start with another term. Look for concepts and terms that might relate to that term. Circle them and then link them with a connecting line. Continue this process until you have found all the associated terms. Some of the terms might end up uncircled, but these "loners" can also be useful to you. (Note: You can use different colored pens/pencils/chalk for this part, if you like. If that's not possible, try to vary the kind of line you use to encircle the topics; use a wavy line, a straight line, a dashed line, a dotted line, a zigzaggy line, etc. in order to see what goes with what.)
4. There! When you stand back and survey your work, you should see a set of clusters, or a big web, or a sort of map: hence the names for this activity. At this point you can start to form conclusions about how to approach your topic. There are about as many possible results to this activity as there are stars in the night sky, so what you do from here will depend on your particular results. Let's take an example or two in order to illustrate how you might form some logical relationships between the clusters and loners you've decided to keep. At the end of the day, what you do with the particular "map" or "cluster set" or "web" that you produce depends on what you need. What does this map or web tell you to do? Explore an option or two and get your draft going!

Relationship between the parts

In this technique, begin by writing the following pairs of terms on opposite margins of one sheet of paper:

Whole Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Part Parts of Parts

Looking over these four groups of pairs, start to fill in your ideas below each heading. Keep going down through as many levels as you can. Now, look at the various parts that comprise the parts of your whole concept. What sorts of conclusions can you draw according to the

patterns, or lack of patterns, that you see?

Journalistic questions

In this technique you would use the “big six” questions that journalists rely on to thoroughly research a story. The six are: Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why?, and How?. Write each question word on a sheet of paper, leaving space between them. Then, write out some sentences or phrases in answer, as they fit your particular topic. You might also answer into a tape recorder if you’d rather talk out your ideas.

Now look over your batch of responses. Do you see that you have more to say about one or two of the questions? Or, are your answers for each question pretty well balanced in depth and content? Was there one question that you had absolutely no answer for? How might this awareness help you to decide how to frame your thesis claim or to organize your paper? Or, how might it reveal what you must work on further, doing library research or interviews or further note-taking?

For example, if your answers reveal that you know a lot more about “where” and “why” something happened than you know about “what” and “when,” how could you use this lack of balance to direct your research or to shape your paper? How might you organize your paper so that it emphasizes the known versus the unknown aspects of evidence in the field of study? What else might you do with your results?

Thinking outside the box

Even when you are writing within a particular academic discipline, you can take advantage of your semesters of experience in other courses from other departments. Let’s say you are writing a paper for an English course. You could ask yourself, “Hmmm, if I were writing about this very same topic in a biology course or using this term in a history course, how might I see or understand it differently? Are there varying definitions for this concept within, say, philosophy or physics, that might encourage me to think about this term from a new, richer point of view?”

For example, when discussing “culture” in your English 101, communications, or cultural studies course, you could incorporate the definition of “culture” that is frequently used in the biological sciences. Remember those little Petri dishes from your lab experiments in high school? Those dishes are used to “culture” substances for bacterial growth and analysis, right? How might it help you write your paper if you thought of “culture” as a medium upon which certain things will grow, will develop in new ways or will even flourish beyond expectations, but upon which the growth of other things might be retarded, significantly altered, or stopped altogether?

Using charts or shapes

If you are more visually inclined, you might create charts, graphs, or tables in lieu of word lists or phrases as you try to shape or explore an idea. You could use the same phrases or words that are central to your topic and try different ways to arrange them spatially, say in a graph,

on a grid, or in a table or chart. You might even try the trusty old flow chart. The important thing here is to get out of the realm of words alone and see how different spatial representations might help you see the relationships among your ideas. If you can't imagine the shape of a chart at first, just put down the words on the page and then draw lines between or around them. Or think of a shape. Do your ideas most easily form a triangle? square? umbrella? Can you put some ideas in parallel formation? In a line?

Consider purpose and audience

Think about the parts of communication involved in any writing or speaking event act: purpose and audience.

What is your purpose? What are you trying to do? What verb captures your intent? Are you trying to inform? Convince? Describe? Each purpose will lead you to a different set of information and help you shape material to include and exclude in a draft. Write about why you are writing this draft in this form.

Who is your audience? Who are you communicating with beyond the grader? What does that audience need to know? What do they already know? What information does that audience need first, second, third? Write about who you are writing to and what they need.

Dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias

When all else fails...this is a tried and true method, loved for centuries by writers of all stripe. Visit the library reference areas or stop by the Writing Center to browse various dictionaries, thesauruses (or other guide books and reference texts), encyclopedias or surf their online counterparts. Sometimes these basic steps are the best ones. It is almost guaranteed that you'll learn several things you did not know.

If you're looking at a hard copy reference, turn to your most important terms and see what sort of variety you find in the definitions. The obscure or archaic definition might help you to appreciate the term's breadth or realize how much its meaning has changed as the language changed. Could that realization be built into your paper somehow?

If you go to online sources, use their own search functions to find your key terms and see what suggestions they offer. For example, if you plug "good" into a thesaurus search, you will be given 14 different entries. Whew! If you were analyzing the film Good Will Hunting, imagine how you could enrich your paper by addressed the six or seven ways that "good" could be interpreted according to how the scenes, lighting, editing, music, etc., emphasized various aspects of "good."

An encyclopedia is sometimes a valuable resource if you need to clarify facts, get quick background, or get a broader context for an event or item. If you are stuck because you have a vague sense of a seemingly important issue, do a quick check with this reference and you may be able to move forward with your ideas.

Closing

Armed with a full quiver of brainstorming techniques and facing sheets of jotted ideas, bulleted subtopics, or spidery webs relating to your paper, what do you do now?

Take the next step and start to write your first draft, or fill in those gaps you've been brainstorming about to complete your "almost ready" paper. If you're a fan of outlining, prepare one that incorporates as much of your brainstorming data as seems logical to you. If you're not a fan, don't make one. Instead, start to write out some larger chunks (large groups of sentences or full paragraphs) to expand upon your smaller clusters and phrases. Keep building from there into larger sections of your paper. You don't have to start at the beginning of the draft. Start writing the section that comes together most easily. You can always go back to write the introduction later.

We also have helpful handouts on some of the next steps in your writing process, such as [organization](#) and [argument](#).

Remember, once you've begun the paper, you can stop and try another brainstorming technique whenever you feel stuck. Keep the energy moving and try several techniques to find what suits you or the particular project you are working on.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the [UNC Libraries citation tutorial](#).

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