

Brainstorming

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial focuses on the first step in the writing process: brainstorming. It includes an examination of brainstorming strategies and how they enable writers to begin writing projects. The way in which brainstorming can help with topic selection is also covered.

This tutorial examines brainstorming in three parts:

1. Brainstorming: The Writing Process, Step One
2. Brainstorming Strategies
 - a. Clustering/Mapping
 - b. Lists
 - c. Freewriting
 - d. Five Ws
 - e. Directed Writing
3. Choosing a Topic

1. Brainstorming: The Writing Process, Step One

The writing process is composed of eight recursive steps that make effective use of a writer's time. Brainstorming is the first step.

Brainstorming involves the use of a number of techniques to generate ideas and clarify thinking. Writers use these techniques to discover and focus their thoughts about a given subject.



TERM TO KNOW

Brainstorming

The use of a variety of techniques to generate ideas and/or clarify thinking.

Brainstorming enables writers to discover what they know or believe about a topic. Brainstorming also helps them to generate ideas. Once writers discover what they know or believe about a topic, they can use a brainstorming technique to search through that knowledge for related ideas, and to set boundaries for their topic. For example, brainstorming can help writers who have been assigned to write a three-page essay about

2. Brainstorming Strategies

Now that you know what it's good for, how do you do it? There are a number of different brainstorming techniques, but all of them share a similar purpose. Five techniques will be described in this section.

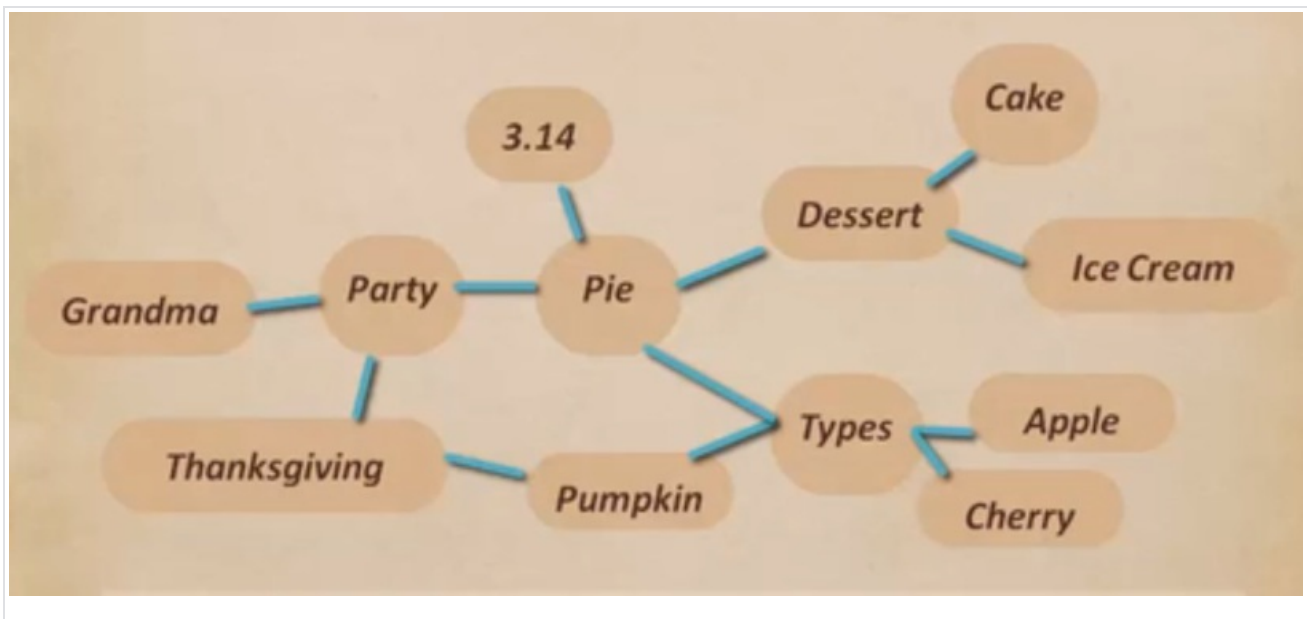


HINT

It's unlikely that any writer would use *all* of these techniques every time he or she begins a writing project. Consider how each of the following methods might help *you* with a writing project. It's possible that your brainstorming needs will be different each time you begin the writing process.

2a. Clustering/Mapping

Clustering, or mapping, is a way to generate ideas using words and shapes, and lines that show the connections between them. To use this technique, begin by thinking about your subject. In this example, the subject is *pie*. To create a map (or cluster) of pie, write *pie*, then surround it with all of the other words that you can associate with it, as shown below:



Even though this cluster is incomplete, it illustrates how a writer can progress from a broad subject to specific examples, and how he or she can discover a different translation of the central term — one that is unrelated to any other term in the cluster.

2b. Lists

Lists are also useful for generating thoughts related to a topic, question, or problem. As shown in the following example, they present thoughts in a more structured way than clustering.

Things About Pie:

- Dessert — others include ice cream, cake, etc.
- Mostly have it at parties — i.e., Thanksgiving, other holidays

- 3.14
- Many different types — cherry, apple, pumpkin (Thanksgiving)

Unlike a cluster, which can take any form, lists tend towards hierarchical arrangement, as the first ideas are placed higher.

2c. Freewriting

Freewriting, which is also referred to as stream-of-consciousness writing or free association, is perhaps the simplest brainstorming technique, but it can produce great results.

To freewrite, just start writing. Write anything and everything that comes to mind as quickly as you can. Keep writing until you can't think of anything else (or your hand hurts from holding a pencil, or your keyboard is steaming). Don't slow down (or stop) to correct grammar or even to "make sense."

Freewriting gives you *something* to work on. It's much easier to work on something, than on nothing (e.g., a blank page that remains blank while the writer struggles to come up with something that makes sense and is grammatically-correct). Here is an example of freewriting:

I like pie but I don't know how to write about pie because when I think about pie I don't think about writing I think most about my grandmother and Thanksgiving. God she made a great pumpkin pie. There are so many kinds of pie, like cherry and apple and I don't want to list them all, but the number 3.14 something something forever also means pie...

Note that this example contains most of the information in the list and cluster examples above. However, it's presented differently, because it was created differently.

2d. Five Ws

The five Ws are *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*. To use the five Ws technique, ask these questions about your topic, or in response to a question or problem you've been asked to write about. Here's an example of results produced by the five Ws technique:

Who: for me, my grandmother, mostly, who use to make pies...
What: a kind of dessert, comes in different kinds like cherry, apple and my grandmother's pumpkin.
When: it's been ages.
Where: anywhere I want...
Why: because pie is a cultural thing, but we don't think of it that way, for some reason.

Most of the writer's responses in this example did not produce useful information (in part as a result of the silly topic). In response to the last W, however, the writer made an insightful statement: an answer to a question (why) that may not have been asked if he or she had not been using the five Ws brainstorming technique.

2e. Directed Writing

Directed writing is writing in response to an assignment. Writing assignments often include not only a topic, but also related questions (or prompts) that are designed to encourage the open-minded thinking involved in brainstorming.

For example, here's a response to an assignment to write about what pie means to you:

It's not a topic I might have chosen myself, but to answer your question, yes, I think that pie has a cultural significance for me. Much of my family moved out of state, but when I was a child we would all get together at my grandmother's house for holidays like Thanksgiving, and there would always be one or even two pies, so for me, now, when I think of pie I think of being a child back there.

Note that this response sounds a bit like an essay. There may be a thesis statement in it, or an interesting narrative that might help the writer to come up with a thesis statement.



BIG IDEA

Brainstorming enables you to organize your thoughts, and to bring to the surface some of the many things you don't know that you know about a topic.

Any of the brainstorming techniques described in this section can help you to begin the writing process. It's up to you to find which of them work best for you in a particular situation. The "best" technique is the one that enables you to find ideas, generate content, and beat "writer's block" before it starts.

3. Choosing a Topic

Brainstorming is particularly helpful when you need to find a topic to write about. Writing assignments often include a broad subject, but not a specific topic. In academic writing, a **topic** is the focus of an essay or other written work. It's what the essay is about.



TERM TO KNOW

Topic

The overarching focus of an essay or other written work.

Any of the preceding brainstorming techniques can help writers to identify topics. If you were assigned to write an essay about pie, you might use clustering or mapping to decide what you want to write about pie.

Take another look at the cluster/map example above. Connections have been drawn between *types* and *desserts* and *party*. Those connections might be interesting, but the connections between the party and the subtopics of Thanksgiving and grandma, and the notion of dessert, might be most productive. It's interesting that, beginning with no more than *pie*, the writer was led to think about his or her grandmother. Perhaps this writer is most interested in the way that food (in this case, pie) can trigger memories.



THINK ABOUT IT

Perhaps you've remembered a relative (who may have died years ago) because of the sight, smell or taste of a dessert she made only once or twice a year. The relationship between food and memory can certainly be a topic worth writing about.



SUMMARY

This tutorial investigated how to begin the writing process by brainstorming. Five brainstorming techniques were examined: clustering/mapping, lists, freewriting, the five Ws, and directed writing. The way in which brainstorming can help writers choose topics for writing projects was also considered.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Brainstorming

Using a variety of techniques to generate ideas and/or clarify thinking.

Topic

The overarching focus of an essay or other piece of writing.